

Executive Function & OCD: The Endless Humiliation

By "D"

Of the problems I face, nothing holds the crushing and relentlessly humiliation of deficits in executive function. I will try to explain why I think this is a major factor in my depression, problems with employment and relationships and how I think it relates to OCD: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. No matter how good you are in some areas there are certain areas you are just not allowed to be bad in. You cannot be late for things. You cannot be bad at grooming and self-care. You cannot leave the door unlocked or leave the stove on.

For a person with autism, these things can often be challenges not because we don't understand their importance, but our brains are not well attuned to these tasks leading to them becoming disproportionate stress in our lives. Inevitably this will lead to OCD and depression and that will make it virtually impossible to prosper. As if this wasn't bad enough, society discriminates fiercely against those that have problems in this area by discounting our value to our employers and seeing us as unworthy human beings.

Executive functioning problems arise when individuals lack the ability to form routines. For many people, after you master a task, you are able to complete it reliably after a time without thinking about it. For many people, including autistics this level of reliability isn't achievable. While it's possible for most of us to do things automatically if the reliability isn't there it's worse than having to do these things with conscious effort as you do not know when you are going to fail.

Let's take the example of Sally. She's in the habit of locking her door at night. For most people, once you have formed this habit you can rest assured you will lock the door every night without exception. For Sally, this habit only works 90% of the time. One night she forgets, and an intruder enters her home. This is extremely traumatizing and confusing for her. After all, she locks the door every night, why would this night be any different? Now, Sally has OCD as she is constantly checking to see if her door is locked as she now knows her habit doesn't always work. Eventually, she spends so much time checking if her door is locked, she has time for nothing else and the problem may become as devastating to her as the home invasion that sparked the problem in the first place! Sally will get no sympathy from others who will see her as a whiner and will not relate to her plight. For them when they form a habit it's always 99% or even 99.9% reliable. Sally's brain is different, so this is not an option for her. She loses all of her self-esteem and plunges into despair.

Another example is Jeff. He is a highly educated and intelligent computer programmer, but he is uncomfortable driving or even cycling on major roads. He takes the bus to work, but because of his problems with executive functioning he occasionally gets on the wrong bus, and this causes a huge delay in his arrival at work on time. His employer has no sympathy and tells him they will fire him if he is late again. Their only advice is that he leaves for work earlier. With an 8-hour workday, Jeff cannot leave for work an hour earlier without compromising something, so he stops showering every morning. As he slowly becomes more and more exhausted, he compromises on this more and more. Before long he has a body-odour problem and his employer fires him – the exact result he was trying to avoid.

You can probably guess that neither Sally nor Jeff would be highly attractive life partners. It would take a saint to stay married to them as such a relationship would inevitably soon become more parental in nature than romantic.

Executive functioning problems are perhaps the most debilitating for those who have the most to offer to society, as many of the most intelligent people in our society have autism and executive functioning problems. People who are unable to perform in these areas are discounted for managerial roles and their ideas are brushed off as irrelevant no matter how smart they may be upon analysis. People with this problem are commonly relegated to the welfare system and this exasperates the stereotype of the seemingly abled person that just doesn't want to work. Lack of money compounds the problem even further as we are now unable to afford reliable transportation or personal hygiene products and the vicious cycle continues.

I'd like to end on a positive note, but there really isn't one. Disabilities with executive functioning are extremely humiliating and devastating. They are not something anyone would choose. It's not just a matter of being careless, forgetful, or thoughtless. It's a physical disease of the brain.

About the Author

"D" is one of Autism Canada's newest Autism Ambassadors and Newsletter Contributors. We would like to take this opportunity to welcome D to our team and we look forward to sharing D's perspectives with our community.