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**Headline:** 'I had a big problem with knives. I thought I might stab the children.'  
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▶ This woman's whole life was ruled by terrifying irrational thoughts till she discovered what was wrong with her.

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**Diana Wilson** was sure she would kill her four small daughters, using a vegetable knife or a razor blade or by drowning them while she was asleep. On a holiday in Normandy, France, with her family, and as her illness reached its most extreme, she'd jam a heavy chair by the bolted door of the bedroom so she couldn't get out to the bed and breakfast's pool with the children without her husband being woken by the noise. She was afraid that, in her sleep, she "would take each baby and drown them. It was terrible. I didn't sleep. I tried to stay awake". She returned from the holiday, to the family's Tunbridge Wells home, exhausted. She had also begun to think she might be a terrorist, because she was convinced that if she kept on looking at a plane she could bring it down and have the deaths of 400 or so people on her conscience. Her friends know her, she says, as a "laid-back Kiwi chick". Even her husband, a British lawyer, had no idea of the severity of her mental illness. She struggled for 20 years with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) before she even knew what it was. It escalated with the birth of her children and was wrongly diagnosed, after the last birth, as post-natal depression. Holidays, where there were pools or ponds, made it worse. But she didn't just worry that she'd drown the children. In Normandy, she made a point of burying her razor blade deep in her sponge bag and putting it where she couldn't easily access it. At home she was already keeping the vegetable knives in the garage or right at the back of the kitchen drawer so she could convince herself they were hidden. "I had a big problem with knives. I thought I might stab the children." She would put the children's pyjama cords into a bag tightened with several knots so she couldn't access them. "It was never going to happen, but I didn't know that," she says down the telephone line from Britain. "You'll do anything to not harm the people you most love in the world." Four years ago, a year after the post-natal depression diagnosis and treatment with anti-depressants, and after the terrifying holiday in Normandy, she went to a psychiatrist. She was exhausted and miserable and thought herself a terrible person and probably a terrorist. "I thought I was going to do something horrendous." The psychiatrist convinced her that not only was she not a monster, but that she would not harm her children. A combination of anti-depressant drugs, cognitive behavioural therapy and counselling helped her heal. She is now working with the British charity OCDUK, run by sufferers of OCD. Her story has been told in several British magazines and papers, including The Times. She

turned down The Mirror because, she says, she envisaged a headline along the lines of Busty Blond Goes Barmy. After a short television appearance earlier this year, OCDUK was inundated with 400 callers, many of them crying. Few had even seen a doctor about a disorder that they, too, were unaware existed.

Sufferers can come to believe they are just evil, horrible people. She did herself.

Diana's own story began in New Zealand. She was brought up with two brothers on a Hawke's Bay farm and went to a small country primary school, Omakere, and then to boarding school. She began to shine at tennis as an 11-year-old and was beginning to play at national level when OCD first began to affect her life. Thoughts would crowd into her head on the court telling her she couldn't do it. Things would go to pieces.

At boarding school she encountered a variation of OCD. "I used to panic. The teacher would place a sheet of paper in front of me and I'd be almost paralysed by fear. I would think, 'I can't do this', and everyone else would be head down. I was panicking. You're never going to learn if you're afraid. The OCD was not responsible, but it played a part."

She said nothing to her teachers or her parents and it wasn't something people would look out for.

She left school at 18, became a ski bum and looked after children. She became convinced, after seeing posters for an Aids-awareness campaign in the 1980s, that she had the disease \_ "and I'd never had sex with a man".

"That is very typical of someone with OCD. I go to a lot of conferences now and it's so sad to meet people of 30 and more who won't have a relationship because they think they've got Aids and might give it to someone else. People with OCD are really caring people and not being in a relationship is a safety behaviour."

She travelled to Britain, worked in a nursery school and met a lawyer, Rob, who, at 28, she married. By that time, she was terrified of contamination in public toilets, sometimes taking half an hour, obsessively wiping surfaces and making sure she had a piece of toilet paper between her and any handles or taps so she didn't touch them.

"It's a feeling that, if you do, you will die," she says.

"There's no grey areas. You don't think you'll catch something, but that you will die or, worse, you will touch someone else and they will die."

She couldn't understand how other women could be in and out of a public toilet in a minute or two.

The illness took a new turn when she became pregnant. She became convinced the child, though she had not slept with anyone else, was not her husband's. She had the same thoughts each time she was pregnant with four daughters.

"With OCD, you focus on the things you love most \_ husband, children, tennis. It's the most extraordinary mental condition."

She couldn't talk to her husband about the host of unwanted thoughts that plagued her. She would become convinced she had left the stove on and check several times, going backward and forward to the house, standing over the oven and doing imaginary clicks.

"With OCD you can't look once and the thought is dismissed. It's like the thought gets stuck halfway between your eyes and you go to walk away and you go back 10 or 15 times and stand over the stove every time. Some people have a big thing about security. I didn't have that, thank God."

She worried about the sterility of plates for her children and would put them through the dishwasher again, and tip out food she had prepared because of fear of germs.

She would convince herself she had hit someone while she was driving and would retrace her movements without finding anything amiss.

"People with OCD know it's irrational, but the thoughts are so overpowering. It's like me giving you a razor blade and saying give it to that six-month-old baby and I put it in your hand. You wouldn't do it, but it would terrify you, the thought of it, wouldn't it?"

"It's an intrusive, unwanted thought. You're doing the vegetables and you've got a knife and you're thinking not that 'I'm going to kill', not 'I will', but 'what if I caused an accident?' People suffering OCD have an over-developed sense of responsibility.

"I don't think anyone has spoken out like I have. People might talk about handwashing, but not these thoughts. I was afraid the children would be taken away by social services.

"If you have cognitive behavioural therapy, anti-depressants and counselling you're fine. It won't go away unless you have that. It will last a lifetime.

"It's a secretive illness but it doesn't need to be. That's what I'm working toward."

#### ----- Treating OCD -----

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) traps sufferers in a pattern of intrusive and unwanted bizarre or terrible repetitive thoughts that are senseless and distressing and extremely difficult to banish.

Many people with OCD try to rid themselves of their obsession by resorting to repetitive, compulsive behaviours, the most common of which are washing and checking. Performing such rituals may give the person with OCD some temporary relief from anxiety.

OCD affects more than 2 per cent of the British population. Marcia Read, founder and head of the Phobic Trust in New Zealand, says there are no reliable statistics on the incidence of OCD in New Zealand, but it could be higher. It is, she says, a huge problem and the most common of mental illnesses, a "terrible, silent and disabling illness".

At its least severe end, people might be "a bit of a perfectionist" in their homes. "That's not a worry. It just means you're keeping things tidy." OCD becomes seriously disabling when, for example, a person won't go home because they think their parents and the house are contaminated. Or they are compelled to clean the walls in their home constantly. "OCD people are perfectionists in what they do. You have people who say their prayers for three hours and if they make a mistake feel they have to go back. It's when you can't stop doing something and it impedes your life." She's aware of New Zealanders who have intrusive thoughts of killing their children. "It's terrible." They do rituals to try to put the thoughts away, maybe washing hands a lot, cleaning and polishing, or checking the door 30 times. People with OCD, she says, do not act on their destructive thoughts.

In New Zealand, says Ms Read, treatment for OCD \_ a mental illness that can affect people at all levels of society \_ is a mixture of therapy, medication and education and support of families. Cognitive behaviour therapy is one of many therapies used. It does not work for every sufferer, says Ms Read.

Wayne Froggatt, head of the New Zealand Centre for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and author of FearLess, a self-help book for anxiety sufferers, says cognitive behaviour therapy is the only therapy that has research backing.

A spokesman for the Health Ministry says the National Health Committee recommendation, not updated since 1998, is that strongest evidence for the psychological treatment of anxiety disorders (of which OCD is one) is for cognitive behaviour therapy.

\* The Phobic Trust can be contacted nationally on 0800 142694389, website: [www.phobic.org.nz](http://www.phobic.org.nz) The New Zealand Centre for Cognitive Behaviour's website is: [www.rational.org.nz](http://www.rational.org.nz)

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Famous obsessives  
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#### HOWARD HUGHES

The billionaire playboy inventor, immortalised in the recent film *The Aviator*, spent his last miserable years obsessed with the thought he'd catch infections from germs.

#### KATHARINE HEPBURN

The legendary Hollywood star was said to have compulsively taken almost 20 showers a day.

#### DAVID BECKHAM

The soccer supremo is said to insist that all his furniture is arranged at precise right angles and that the contents of his fridge are lined up in ruler-exact order.

#### HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

The Danish writer, famous for fairytales such as *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Little Mermaid*, obsessed about being murdered or drowning.

#### BRIAN WILSON

The Beach Boys singer/-songwriter was observed to be so obsessed with minutiae that he endlessly counted floor or ceiling tiles or components of his dinner, such as peas.