

# I've Got a Little List...I've Got a Little List

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We think of obsessions as emotions so intense as to nullify rectitude or reason. Admittedly, obsessions can be narrowly focused, such as the building of the world's biggest sandcastle or collecting the most diversified display of butterflies, but most are broader and pertain to unrequited human passions. Obsessions may come in all sizes and durations; they may be trivial, short-lived, or enduring and magnificent in their grandeur and sweep. Generally though, they are persistent, phobic, haunting, anxiety-producing and sometimes maniacal.

Then there is the word compulsion or its adjective, compulsive. Dictionaries define this word as the fulfillment of an act, usually initiated by an irresistible impulse which is contrary to the individual's conscious agenda. While most compulsions stem from the psyche of the individual, some compulsions are extracorporeal, established through legislation or societal regulation. Compulsory gymnasium attendance or compulsory military service, for example, representing things required by society but not arising, necessarily, from the inner emotional needs of the individual. Compulsive behaviors, generally, are repetitive, on the surface illogical, and in reaction to obsessive moods. These inciting obsessions may be blasphemous thoughts, unbidden aggressive feelings or, frequently, inappropriate sexual ideation.

And the synergy of obsession and compulsion? Obsessive feelings often initiate unreasonable, compulsive responses. Unreasoned fear of bacterial contamination, for example, may be so distressful that only repetitive hand-washing offers any relief.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is now a defined psychiatric condition afflicting about two percent of the adult population. Obsessive-compulsive behavior, on the other hand, is far more pervasive, tends to be more narrowly idiosyncratic, episodic rather than continuous and does not overwhelm or paralyze its victims.

It is sometimes stated that Professor X, despite being a victim of Disease Z, nonetheless succeeded in elucidating the cause of Disease Y. The operative word in the preceding sentence, 'despite', suggests that were it not for the oppressive effects of Disease Z, Professor X would have accomplished yet more during his lifetime. Perhaps. But sometimes there are clinical features inherent in Disease X that might enhance rather than restrain the creative impulses of someone with the temperament of Professor X. Consider the lengthy and creative life of Peter Mark Roget, physician, teacher, lexicographer and scientist.

The SoHo district of London, during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, was heavily populated with Huguenot refugees from France. Declaring that adherence to the Protestant faith was illegal, Louis XIV expelled the Huguenots [followers of Hugues, a disciple of Calvin] from Catholic France. In 1775, the French Protestant Church in London, in need of a pastor, recruited Reverend Jean Roget of Geneva. In 1778 he married Catherine Romilly, daughter of a prominent British family. On January 18, 1779, their first child, Peter Mark, was born. Later that year Pastor Roget took ill with tuberculosis. He and Catherine fled to Switzerland in hopes of finding a rest cure in the high

Alpine altitudes. Peter, still an infant, stayed in London with his mother's family.

These were troubled times for the Roget child: his father was dying in Switzerland, while his surrogate family in England, the Romillys, were distracted by widespread mental disorder within their ranks. Following his father's death, his mother's possessive dependency made his childhood extremely difficult. He learned to cope, however, with a compulsive habit of classifying things; and he maintained a series of notebooks containing all of his revelations on the orderliness of life around him. His great hero was Carolus Linnaeus [1707 – 1778] the great Swedish physician-botanist who organized all living matter, whether plant or animal, in a great binomial classification used, virtually unaltered, to this day. Young Peter marveled at the genius of Linnaeus to reduce the immensity of life, from the smallest to the largest, into a systematized regimen which replaced an unsettling vision of life with an idyllic and structured sense of order: every plant, every creature in proper relation to each other, a tranquil tapestry in accord with God's concept of order.

And so young Peter went through childhood constantly making lists of things as his way of transforming chaos into a serene, symmetrical visage of life. Peter began his University education in Edinburgh in 1793. His medical studies went well and he was awarded his doctoral degree in medicine on June 25, 1798.

Despite intervals of intense anxiety, obsessive ideation regarding cleanliness, and depression, the next few decades saw Dr. Roget practicing in Manchester and finally establishing a commendable practice of medicine in London. He achieved prominence not only in the clinical arts but as the inventor of the log-log slide rule, as Secretary of the Royal Society, as an esteemed lecturer in medical physiology, and as the author of that century's most authoritative text on comparative and human physiology.

These were also difficult years for Roget: he witnessed the suicide of his father-in-law; saw the emotional deterioration of his mother, his sister, and later, even his daughter. His ultimate professional goal in life, however, was fulfilled, namely, the gathering of his many verbal lists into a single, memorable lexicographic text of synonyms. He remembered the words of his professor at Edinburgh: "As it is by language alone that we are rendered capable of general reasoning, one of the most valuable branches of logic is that which relates to the use of words." And Peter's compulsive habit of listing things evolved finally into "Roget's Thesaurus."

– STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD

## Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, has no financial interests to disclose.

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