



Pullingthetrigger****®

There is recovery and a place beyond. We promise.

**Juniors &
teenagers**

**Including Guidance
for Parents**

The complete guide
for your family



ANXIETY, WORRY, OCD & PANIC ATTACKS

The Definitive **Recovery Approach**



BY LAUREN CALLAGHAN
& ADAM SHAW

Pullingthe**trigger**[®]

Anxiety, Worry, OCD and Panic Attacks – The Family Edition (Juniors, Teenagers and Parents) The Definitive **Recovery Approach**

By Adam Shaw and Lauren Callaghan (CPsychol,
PGDipClinPsych, PgCert, MA (hons), LLB (hons), BA)

From the heart and soul of a lifelong OCD and anxiety sufferer, and the expert mind and experience of a leading clinical psychologist, Trigger Press Publishing are proud to introduce the simple yet highly effective self-help method for families (juniors, teenagers and parents and caregivers) – a survival and recovery approach for anxiety, worry, OCD and panic attacks.

The authors

Adam Shaw is a UK philanthropist. Now in recovery from mental health issues himself, he is committed to helping others suffering from debilitating mental health issues through the global charity he co-founded, The Shaw Mind Foundation, www.shawmindfoundation.org.

Lauren Callaghan (CPsychol, PGDipClinPsych, PgCert, MA (hons), LLB (hons), BA), born and educated in New Zealand, is a specialist leading Clinical Psychologist based in London (UK) and the clinic director of two successful private practices which specialise in treating obsessional problems, anxiety disorders and depression. She is very experienced in working with children, adolescents and their families across different mental health settings, as well as with adults suffering from anxiety and obsessional problems.

First published in Great Britain 2017 by Trigger Press

The Foundation Centre
Navigation House, 48 Millgate, Newark
Nottinghamshire NG24 4TS UK

www.trigger-press.com

© 2017 Adam Shaw and Lauren Callaghan

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior
permission in writing from the publisher

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available upon request from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-911246-05-3

This book is also available in the following e-book formats:

MOBI: 978-1-911246-08-4

EPUB: 978-1-911246-06-0

PDF: 978-1-911246-07-7

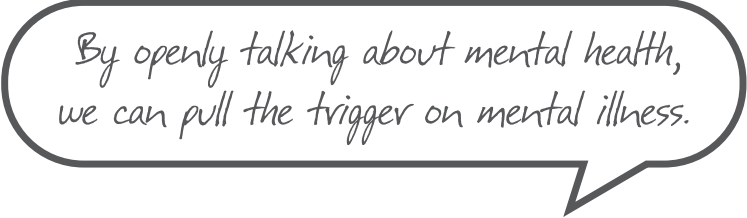
Adam Shaw and Lauren Callaghan have asserted their right under the Copyright,
Design and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the authors of this work

Cover design, illustrations and typesetting by Fusion Graphic Design Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press, Gosport

Paper from responsible sources

Dedicated to all the sufferers of any mental health issue and their loved ones, and to those working tirelessly across all spectrums around the world to bring a better understanding and awareness of mental health issues through research, support and treatment.



*By openly talking about mental health,
we can pull the trigger on mental illness.*

***Thank you for purchasing this book,
you are making an incredible difference***

All of our **Pullingthe**trigger****[®] products have substantial enterprising and philanthropic value which generate contributing proceeds towards our global mental health charity,
The Shaw Mind Foundation

Mission Statement

'We aim to bring to an end the suffering and despair caused by mental health issues. Our goal is to make help and support available for every single person in society, from all walks of life. We will never stop offering hope. These are our promises.'

Pulling the Trigger and The Shaw Mind Foundation



The Shaw Mind Foundation (www.shawmindfoundation.org) offers unconditional support for all who are affected by mental health issues. We are a global foundation that is not for profit. Our core ethos is to help those with mental health issues and their families at the point of need. We also continue to run and invest in mental health treatment approaches in local communities around the globe, which support those from the most vulnerable and socially deprived areas of society. Please join us and help us make an incredible difference to those who are suffering with mental health issues **#letsdostuff**.

Contents

Introduction	1
---------------------------	---

Part I Adam Shaw – My Story

Chapter 1: My Battle with Worry	12
Chapter 2: It's All My Fault!	16
Chapter 3: Don't Wish Bad Things.....	19
Chapter 4: Back from the Brink.....	22
Chapter 5: The Anxiety Behind the Worries	25
Chapter 6: Anxiety and Obsessional Disorders in Children	30
Chapter 7: The Truth About Anxiety	34
Chapter 8: OCD in Children.....	40

Part II Pullingthe**trigger**[®] Managing Anxiety in Children

Chapter 9: Let's Meet Skeet.....	46
Chapter 10: How to Deal with Your Worries	60
Chapter 11: Thinking Traps and Other Ways to Beat Worry	66
Chapter 12: How to Beat OCD.....	87
Chapter 13: Life Beyond Worry and OCD.....	104
Chapter 14: The Power of Sleep.....	106
Chapter 15: Be Brilliant!	110

Managing Anxiety in Teenagers

Chapter 16: Getting to Grips with Anxiety.....	114
Chapter 17: ACCEPT	122
Chapter 18: Are You Falling into Thinking Traps?	131
Chapter 19: EMBRACE.....	141
Chapter 20: Testing It All Out	154
Chapter 21: CONTROL	167
Chapter 22: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	175
Chapter 23: Recovery from OCD	193
Chapter 24: Panic Attacks	211
Chapter 25: A Plan for Life Beyond OCD, Anxiety and Worry.....	220

Conclusion	225
-------------------------	-----

Introduction

**Accept Your Mind, Own It For What It Is.
This Takes Courage, Not Fight**

All my life, from being a little boy to a grown man, I tried to suppress my thoughts and anxiety because I knew no better and because I felt compelled to fight them. I was frightened, ashamed and appalled about my thoughts. My situation was terrifying, lonely and debilitating. I constantly felt that I was on the edge of madness and no one could help me. It felt like a war I was gradually losing every day as my strength depleted and my energy drained. The day I brought Lauren into my life, some 30 years later, was the day I stopped fighting and my life changed forever. The day I truly accepted my thoughts and embraced them was the day I began to take control. This made surviving my anxiety-based mental illness possible, and more importantly, it made my recovery inevitable. A new life was beginning for me. No words will ever be enough to thank my wife, Alissa, my beautiful children and of course my therapist and colleague, Lauren Callaghan, for all their unconditional love and support.

Adam Shaw



Adam Shaw: We can all change the game on mental health recovery. It's time for a new way of thinking, so let's make recovery possible for all.

Anxiety and OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) have, until quite recently, caused me many difficulties and prevented me from leading a normal life. Although I have helped to raise a large family and been successful in business, my mind has constantly been in turmoil – and all because of the thoughts that have occupied it over the years since I was a small child.

When I was young I worried a lot about all sorts of things – things that might seem silly now. My mind came up with more and more worries and these were very upsetting to me. At first, I worried about bad things happening to my family. Then my worries started telling me that I might be the kind of person who caused bad things to happen to other people. Yet I'm the sort of person who wouldn't harm a fly. I just couldn't understand why I was having 'bad' thoughts. There were many times I thought I was going mad, or that I was a danger to people and had to do certain things so others would be kept safe. For many years I hid this secret about the workings of my mind. Using a variety of complicated and exhausting techniques I tried hard to push away my thoughts and get on with being 'normal'. But the harder I pushed, the bigger the problem became. The more I tried to run away and hide, the faster my worries pursued me. It sounds like a horrible nightmare and it was – except I was living this nightmare all day, every day, for a long time.

As you might expect, there is only so long a person can bottle up their worries and anxieties before something dramatic happens. During the period I was fighting anxiety (and, as we will see, 'fighting' is exactly what you shouldn't do!) I had several periods of very poor mental health, the last of which caused me huge distress and led me to think about ending my life. Mentally, I was very troubled indeed, but luckily I sought help from exactly the right person. This was Lauren Callaghan, a highly trained and very experienced therapist who is also co-author of this book.

Why did we decide to write this book?

Having a course of evidence-based therapy finally broke the chains of anxiety that had held me down for so long. However, now I see that if I'd been shown such techniques as a child or a teenager, I would have been able to use them when I was younger, and they would have prevented a lot of distress and difficult periods of anxiety as an adult. This is why I decided, with Lauren, to write a book and share our approach. The techniques I received were so life-changing that I wanted to present them to as many other people suffering from anxiety as possible.

In therapy, Lauren taught me many things that I wished I'd learned when I was much younger and my anxiety was just developing. Perhaps the biggest lesson I learned from her was that I shouldn't fight or run away from my worries. Instead, I should accept them for what they are, embrace them and by doing so, control them. So the three short words which sum up these techniques are:

- **Accept**
- **Embrace**
- **Control**

These three words form the basis of everything Lauren and I will teach you and younger readers in this book. It is a simple, highly effective method and it can work for anyone. It changed my life, and now it can change yours.

- We **accept** that we all have worries and fears, and experience anxiety, and understand that is our current state of mind. We do not question or fight our state of mind; instead, we allow it to be what it is.
- We face our worries and fears, **embrace** them, move towards them and let them in. We do not 'run away' by distracting ourselves, avoiding them or doing other things that we believe will keep ourselves and others 'safe' but which actually cause more problems in the long term.
- We eventually learn how to **control** our mental health and see it for what it is without judging it – a collection of thoughts, feelings and behaviours; no more, no less. 'Control' means accepting that it's OK not to be in control of your thoughts, and the sensations and emotions attached to them.

Our treatment is a combination of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with a Kindness-Focused Approach and it has evolved from the techniques which Lauren introduced me to, as well as our combined experience, wisdom and expertise. CBT gives us a new way of examining the unhelpful thoughts that we have, helps us look at those thoughts in a different way, and changes our responses. CBT gets easier the more you do it. And we use a very compassionate approach that encourages you to be kind to yourself. Try to remember that we all have unhelpful thoughts, uncomfortable feelings and strange or problematic behaviours from time to time. So try and be a little less hard on yourself. You have already taken a huge step forward in buying this book, so you can be proud of that.

You'll be pleased to hear that this approach is simple. I'm not a qualified medical person, and the last thing I needed when I was recovering from anxiety and OCD was a lot of confusing information. I needed to be shown a clear path to recovery, and this treatment approach gave me exactly that.

If you follow this approach, even if it might seem uncomfortable at times, you and younger readers will recover. We promise this.

I understand how it feels to be young and worry a lot. I experienced how isolating and lonely it can be. I know what it is like to have troubling thoughts inside your head, and not understand why they're there, or what to do with them. I know what it is like to ask 'Why me?' every day of your life ...

I also know that only by accepting and embracing anxiety, worry and OCD will you ever learn to control them, and stop them ruining your life. Think about it like jumping off a diving board. At first, the fear you have as you stand above the drop feels overwhelming. But you jump, and you realise that it wasn't quite as bad as you thought it was going to be. Then you do it again, and again, and each time you do it, you feel less and less fear. That is how you tackle anxiety, worry and OCD – by facing it full on. This approach will give you everything you need to rid your mind of the worries, fears, obsessions, and the unhelpful behaviours and compulsions that dominate and ruin your life.

How does this book work?

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I we will explain to parents, caregivers and teenagers what anxiety is, and how it can show itself in children and young people. I will share my own story of living with anxiety with you. Then we'll go on to work directly with younger children, using simple language to look at worry and anxiety, and examine the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour. We will look at how parents and caregivers can help younger children, and include chapters with a focus on how to tackle OCD in children.

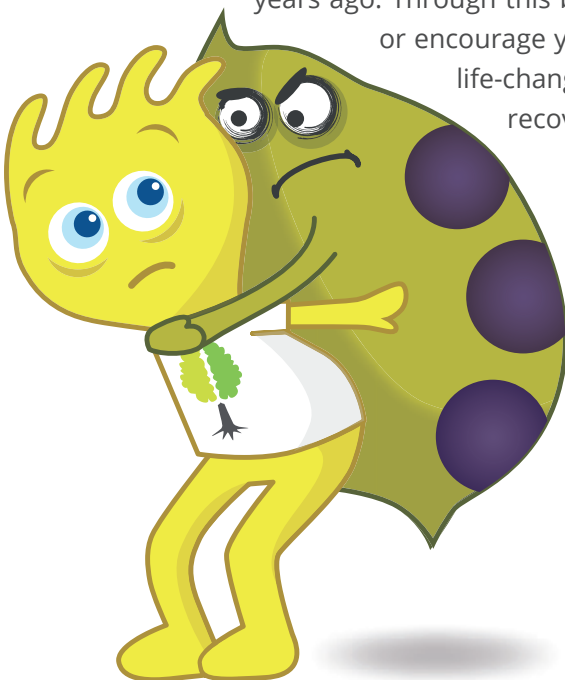
Part II of the book is aimed specifically at children and teenagers, and explains our 'Accept-Embrace-Control' approach in more detail. We have included a section on panic attacks and how to maintain a healthy and positive lifestyle once recovery is underway.

In both sections, we include a range of practical exercises to suit specific age groups, and throughout, we encourage and support parents and caregivers to engage with their child's or teenager's difficulties.

For children, we will use our 'Skeet and Itch' cartoon characters. Skeet is normally a happy, friendly child with good friends and fun hobbies. But quite often, Skeet feels sad. He worries about a lot of things, and suffers with anxiety and OCD. That's where Itch comes in. Itch is all of Skeet's fears and worries, his anxieties and his OCD represented as a sticky slug that just won't leave Skeet alone. Itch is a heavy burden that won't let Skeet enjoy his life.

Finally, I should just explain why we've called our books about anxiety and OCD *Pulling The Trigger*. You'll be glad to hear that it's nothing to do with guns! Many things 'triggered' my anxiety and OCD but I avoided those triggers, hoping the illness would go away. In fact, avoiding them actually made the illness worse. Now I see that if I'd gone towards those triggers and 'pulled' them – if I'd just faced my fears instead of running away – I would have sorted out my difficulties years ago. Through this book and this approach, I want you to do the same, or encourage younger readers to do it. Good luck everyone on this life-changing journey. Even if it gets tricky, do stay with it. Your recovery is within reach.

We promise.





Lauren Callaghan: Hi, I'm Lauren and I'm really pleased that you've picked up this book. It means you've taken a positive step towards your own, or your child's recovery from anxiety, worry and OCD.

First, a bit about me. I'm originally from New Zealand, where I trained as a clinical psychologist. I was interested in human behaviour and I wanted to be in a profession that helped people, and in which you could see the direct impact of your work in making positive changes for individuals, families and communities. Eventually I moved to the UK and I now live in London with my family, where I run two practices specialising in treating a number of disorders, including anxiety and obsessional problems. I have a lot of experience working with children, adolescents and their families. I have previously worked in secure hospital settings for young people, as well as part of a community and school-based mental health team, working closely with young people, their families, schools and communities. I went on to specialise in the treatment of anxiety problems, so I understand the difficulties that you and your family are facing, and I'm experienced in developing and promoting age-appropriate treatment for these problems. Our unique treatment approach, which you'll discover in this book, is a very effective approach to the treatment of anxiety, worry, OCD and panic attacks.

What is worry?

In simple terms, worry is when we dwell on things that seem threatening to us in some way. We keep thinking about these things and may go over and over them in our heads. Worry is based on things that haven't actually happened, so we often worry about things that 'might' happen, or things that have already happened, but we can't actually change.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a physical and emotional response to worry; to something we consider to be threatening. We all experience anxiety at some point in our lives. When we feel anxious this affects how our body responds, known as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. 'Fight, flight or freeze' is a very human, very normal way of responding when we feel under threat. In fact, it's been a part of our lives since the time of the cavemen. When they encountered a threat like a terrifying sabre-tooth tiger, they had three choices: they could stand their ground and attempt to fight the tiger, they could run away as fast as their hairy legs could carry them, or they could freeze and hope the tiger would pass them by in favour of tastier prey. That's fight, flight or freeze in a nutshell.

The words 'anxiety', 'fear' and 'worry' are often used interchangeably, but here's what we mean when we talk about anxiety, fear and worry in this book:

- Worries are the thoughts you have about a future event, real or imagined, that scare you. Or they can be about things that have happened that we can't change.
- Fear is the emotional reaction to real or perceived imminent danger.
- Anxiety describes the emotions (including fear and physiological sensations) that we have in response to what we anticipate as a threat.

What is OCD?

My definition of OCD is that it's an obsessional problem that can be about anything, causing us to feel anxious, depressed, ashamed and guilty. In brief, OCD is when people have uncontrollable, upsetting thoughts called intrusions which they interpret as threatening. This makes them feel worried, anxious and fearful. Naturally they want to minimise or reduce the threat by doing something. This may be a compulsion or ritual, or some other 'safety behaviour'.

What are intrusions?

Intrusions are thoughts, or images or doubts or even feelings, urges or sensations that are uncontrollable. Not all intrusions are unwanted, e.g. having an image pop into your head about your last holiday on the beach. But in OCD, intrusive thoughts are unwanted and very unpleasant. For example, you might have an image pop into your head of someone close to you dying, or have an intrusive feeling that things are just 'not right' which suddenly overwhelms you.

What are obsessions?

Obsessions are the upsetting intrusions in OCD, which as we've said, can be thoughts, or images or doubts, or even feelings, urges or sensations. These might include thoughts of harming yourself or others, having the urge to push someone down the stairs, having doubts that you did a certain thing properly, having thoughts that something bad will happen because of something you did or didn't do, or worries about things being out of order. (Of course, this is only a tiny list; the number of things people can fixate on is practically infinite.)

What are compulsions?

Compulsions, also known as rituals, are the things we do (or don't do) to reduce or eliminate intrusions or stop the feared outcome from happening. These might include excessive handwashing or cleaning, checking and tidying, repeating words silently, avoiding people or certain situations, collecting items, or seeking reassurance from other ritualised actions such as turning switches on and off. (Remember, this not an exhaustive list.) We do these things because we believe in some way that they keep things stable and safe.

What are safety behaviours?

Safety behaviours are the behaviours we rely on when we have an anxiety problem because we believe that they will protect us from the feared consequence. They often include avoidance (when people try to avoid the thoughts, feelings and situations that frighten them in the hope it will keep them 'safe') or seeking reassurance from people to confirm or reject a supposition or belief. In OCD safety behaviours include compulsions and rituals.

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are short-lived but very intense experiences of anxiety building up in our bodies. They can be terrifying and overwhelming, and people experience the physical signs of fear and anxiety, including increased heart rate, shallow breathing, feeling hot and sweaty, dizziness and feeling sick. They can happen out of the blue for no apparent reason, or as part of a worrying situation. During a panic attack, people often worry that something is wrong with them and/or that a panic attack will happen again suddenly, so do their best to stop this from happening.

Why do we experience anxiety?

Anxiety is a perfectly natural response to a threatening situation and we all experience it from time to time. It is a fundamental part of being human, and we cannot banish it permanently just because at some points in our lives it misfires and becomes a problem. What we can do instead is manage it so that it doesn't become a bigger problem than it needs to be.

We understand that, as a parent, it is very difficult to watch your child suffering from anxiety. The need to respond in a way which removes the anxiety completely is overwhelming. But please remember: **anxiety is normal**. It is nature's way of responding to a threat, and it prompts the 'fight, flight or freeze' mechanism (explained in more detail in Chapter 5) which is very useful indeed in difficult situations.

So if you are experiencing anxiety, or you're the parent of a child who is, you are by no means alone. There are millions of people in the same boat, all trying to figure out why they feel bad and what they can do to stop the feeling. For most of us, anxiety is only a fleeting problem – a response to giving a talk in class, or an annual trip to the dentist, for example. For others, it is a severe issue; a persistent, chronic problem that negatively affects many parts of their lives.

It is normal, as a parent, to not only feel sympathy for your child as s/he struggles with anxiety, but also to feel guilty for the part you think you may have played in causing it. However, please try not to blame yourself. It is not helpful for you or them, and it won't help your child overcome it. Anxiety problems develop for many reasons and they are common.

Estimates suggest that up to 10 per cent of all children have an anxiety problem. As a parent, you may have anxiety too, which might make it difficult for you to engage with our treatment plan because you want to protect and reassure your child about the things they find distressing (which might be things you find distressing too!) Again, this is perfectly normal. If you are in this situation it may be worth looking at our companion book for adults (**Pulling the Trigger**: The definitive survival and recovery approach for OCD, anxiety, panic attacks and related depression) to help you understand how to manage anxiety for yourself.

Our treatment method uses 'exposure' techniques which allow the child or young person to experiment with, and confront their fears, and see them for what they are: essentially, just thoughts that are scary, or worrying thoughts about events that haven't happened, or are unlikely to happen, or are unlikely to be as awful as they imagine. However, this does not mean we will

force children into situations that they do find scary – that might make the problem even worse! Instead, we work in a graduated way, teaching children with anxiety that only by facing fear do we ever conquer it.

For example, a child who is frightened of dogs would understandably have a meltdown if they were put in a room with a barking Alsatian or Rottweiler. But they might start to understand that not all dogs are threatening if they're encouraged to give a friendly poodle a pat on the head.

On the subject of dogs, perhaps we should mention that family behaviour around a child with anxiety problems can actually make the anxiety worse. If, say, your child is scared of dogs, you may seek to alleviate their worry by not going anywhere as a family that will involve encounters with dogs. By reassuring the child that you won't encounter a dog, it doesn't just reinforce the fear that all dogs are dangerous and out to attack, but it severely restricts what the family can do socially. In a nutshell, it becomes the whole family's problem – and it can apply to many different forms of anxiety. So in this book we encourage parents and caregivers to think about how their child's anxiety is affecting patterns of family life, how they might be facilitating this, and how to manage it for the benefit of everyone.

FOR TEENAGERS

Over 13? Then I think you might prefer to work through this book yourself. It's worth it. It'll give you a whole new understanding about your anxiety problem as a result. You might need a little extra help from a therapist, or someone you trust who'll listen to you without making judgements. This might be a parent or caregiver, but it could be a teacher, a school counsellor, or a relative. The first thing we ask you to do is read Adam's story in the next chapter. See if some or all of his story sounds familiar to you. Hopefully it will. After that, you'll move on to your own dedicated section in Part II. We completely understand that dealing with anxiety, worry and OCD is scary and difficult. As a teenager, you already have a lot going on in your life, and the last thing you need is a big extra dose of worry and fear. You're probably feeling alone and isolated, and you think that no one understands how you feel, or why you're worried. You're trying to pretend that you're OK, that things are normal and that no one will notice how bad you're feeling. And that can be exhausting. It's scary and it's difficult, and it is messing around with your life. But there is help out there. This book can help you manage your anxieties and see them for what they are: a collection of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. While they might seem unpleasant, that is all they are.

Finally, parents and caregivers need to spend time reading this book, understanding what anxiety is and how it applies to their child, then working through each section carefully. That can be a big ask when you have busy working lives and possibly other children to see to. But if you can devote just a bit of time every day, you'll soon see the benefits. Our approach is not complicated but it does require dedication and commitment. As a parent, you will need to be your child's guide.

The next chapter is Adam's story. He tells us about the difficulties he experienced with anxiety, worry and OCD from childhood up to his late teens. This chapter is an essential read. Adam's personal experience inspired this book and he knows, first-hand, exactly what it is like to suffer from extreme anxiety as a child and teenager.

I can't promise it will always be easy. If it was then you probably wouldn't need to read this book at all. It is challenging and it requires patience, perseverance and trust. However, if you approach this book and treatment method with an open mind you will see results and you WILL get better, just as Adam did, just at the point when he thought all hope had been lost.

Good luck on your journey, and stay with it!

Part I

Adam Shaw – My Story

Chapter 1

My Battle with Worry

My name is Adam Shaw, and I was born in the UK city of Sheffield in 1977. Our family is an ordinary one – my dad was a builder and my mum worked in a bank. My dad came from one of the poorest parts of Sheffield but worked hard to build a business. Compared to other people in the area we were comfortably off. When I was younger I enjoyed holidays abroad, nice clothes and brand new trainers. Saying that, my mum and dad made me understand the value of money, and how hard work brings rewards in life.

I was a secure and happy child with no obvious difficulties and I certainly didn't feel 'different' to other people. I didn't have any issues with either of my parents and I can't find any reason to think we were anything other than a normal family.

If I'm asked about my earliest memories I can remember opening my first ever Spider-Man toy on Christmas Day, or proudly wearing my new football kit. But my strongest memories, which began to form around the age of five, are of my developing anxiety.

Little worries

I started school at the age of five. Like most children that age, I was accompanied on the journey to school by my parents. In my case, this was almost always my mum. For some reason, I developed the idea that my mum would be in danger after she'd dropped me off, and that she might be harmed on her way home.

This left me feeling sad, anxious and worried.

'Will she pick me up from school?' I wondered, 'or will she be dead somewhere? What will I do then?' I fretted over what might happen to her when she was out of my sight.

I couldn't figure out what might happen if she didn't pick me up. I was doing well at school and making friends. Outwardly everything was OK, but inside I felt sad – really sad and worried – and I couldn't understand why that was.

I noticed that my worries were beginning as soon as I woke up in the morning. An uneasy feeling would creep over me the minute I opened my eyes. It made me want to cry.



'What will happen today?'

'Will mum be killed or injured?'

'This feels horrible. How can I stop feeling so bad?'

These thoughts nagged me and I couldn't shake them off. Then, by chance, I discovered a little routine that suddenly made everything feel OK again. I noticed that if I looked under my bed four times before getting out of it – twice on one side, twice on the other – everything that day would be just fine. There were four members of our family: mum, dad, myself and sister Lauren, so doing things four times made sense.

And it was always four. If I counted wrong, I'd have to start again. But if I got it right, I would feel bright and happy and I'd have no worries. This lasted for a while and I was pleased I'd found something that made me feel better. I did not know, but this was the beginning of my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

'Look at the clouds!'

Later, we will learn that anxiety, worry and OCD have a nasty way of getting past rituals designed to make you feel better, by turning them into ones which no longer work. So one day, just after I'd arrived at school, I became anxious and worried about my mum as she left to go home. Although I'd done the 'four times' ritual, for some reason it hadn't worked that day.

Then I caught a glimpse of a cloud, high above the school. And this is what I thought:

'I've just seen a big cloud. No one else has seen it but me, and if no one else sees it something bad will happen to my mum.'

I don't know why I chose clouds. It doesn't really matter. What counts is that I'd attached an **importance** to them, a meaning that spelled disaster. I knew that in seconds, the cloud would change shape and never look the same again. I needed someone else to look at it, and quickly.

I turned to my school mates. 'Look at the clouds!' I shouted, 'look at the clouds!' Puzzled, they looked up. 'They're just clouds,' one of them said. 'So what?'

I didn't explain, but immediately I felt better because they'd seen it too. And for about two years I did the same thing, every single day. I must have driven my friends mad, but they always did what I asked, and they even turned it into a joke.



My worries and anxieties began to interfere with my life, particularly sport. Some of the hardest times I had with the 'clouds' worry was during PE in the school playground. I dreaded going out to play football on a dull day in case I caught sight of the clouds.

The other boys would be too involved in the game to take any notice of me asking them to look up at the sky, and if my teacher caught me turning one of my friends' heads upwards (which I sometimes did) I got into trouble. This became agony for me, particularly if I needed to 'head' the ball towards the goal. My dad would come to watch me playing for the school team and he noticed my reluctance to head the ball.

'What's the matter, son?' he asked. 'Are you scared of it hurting you?'

I nodded in agreement. But I wasn't scared of the ball at all; I was scared of seeing the clouds, and the message of doom that they seemed to carry.

The clouds worry must have lasted two years or more, and all that time I was tormented by thoughts that bad things would happen to my family. As parents or caregivers we're sometimes too quick to dismiss such thoughts as silly nonsense but as children – particularly those who are sensitive to the world around them – worries and anxieties can be hard to shake off.

There were times when I saw clouds and others didn't, yet nothing bad happened to my mum or anyone else in my family. Now I know that there is no connection between seeing clouds (or anything else) and bad things happening to loved ones, but I just didn't make that connection then. I was stuck in a loop of worry and fear.

Even at home, and with my mum around, the clouds obsession still nagged me. The summer holidays were a nightmare. With my classmates scattered for the full six weeks, there were few other kids around who could see the clouds with me. For days and weeks I'd keep my head low, making sure I didn't look up at the sky.

It was very hard to keep this up for such a long time, and I became so low, miserable and worried that eventually I decided to tell my mum. As you might expect, my explanation about clouds and bad things happening sounded, to adult ears, just plain silly. Remember that this was in the days when anxiety, worry and OCD didn't have the awareness it does today.

'Now Adam,' my mum said, 'you really mustn't start thinking like that and wishing bad things on yourself. That's how people end up in mental hospitals.'



She meant well. Generally, most parents and caregivers mean well, even if what they say doesn't always come out the right way. I don't blame my mum at all for saying it. She was only trying to help.

And it worked – but for all the wrong reasons. I started to worry about mental hospitals. I'd heard about these places – big, scary old buildings full of padded cells and mad people wandering about in their nightclothes, screaming and crying. In fact, there was one such place near us that was feared locally as somewhere you might end up in if you were a 'lunatic'.

So far from making me feel better, the idea that I might end up in a madhouse caused even more anxiety. Just thinking about it made me feel sick with worry.

'Oh my God,' I thought, 'I can't end up there. I'll really not have to look at the clouds now.'

From day to day I was trying to live a normal life, but most of the time I just felt as though a deep, dark gloom was hanging over me. It was a daily battle to remain cheerful and unworried.

Chapter 2

It's All My Fault!

As I grew a bit older, the clouds obsession faded, but I still believed something bad would happen if I didn't carry out my 'four times' ritual regularly. I had to switch lights on and off four times, taps on and off four times. And if I got anything 'wrong', e.g. only turning the light off three times instead of four, I'd have to do the whole thing over again. Before and after every football match I played in, I'd have to do four 'kick-ups' with the ball each time. This ritual became worse during the times I was on my own, and even when it wasn't there, I always had a 'heavy' feeling that it would soon come back. Just having a bath became a ritual, in that I had to turn on the hot tap in four-second bursts. It was dominating my life and causing a lot of distress.

I must stress that, on the surface, I was a normal kid. This makes it quite difficult for parents to spot the signs of anxiety, worry and OCD. I was just like anyone else my age; I had a sense of humour, I loved sport, I liked hanging out with my friends. I was normal. Yet inside I felt a mess, and no matter how hard I tried, this mess was always around to haunt me.

'All my fault'

One summer, when I was around 10 or 11, I went on a camping trip with my best friend, Chris, and his parents. On the Sunday, just a few hours before we were due to go home, we headed for the woods close by the camp. We'd taken a box of matches from a tent and, as boys do, we were playing with them, striking them before quickly blowing them out.

'We'd better leave some in the box,' Chris said, 'so my mum and dad won't suspect we've been playing with them.'

As we reached the edge of the wood, on the way back to the camp, Chris inspected the box.

'I'm sure there were more left in here than this,' he said. 'Maybe some have dropped out?'





'Maybe,' I said. Then, a huge wave of panic and fear swept over me like I'd never experienced before.

'We've left live matches in the woods,' I thought. 'What happens if they catch fire, the trees burn down and all the animals are killed?'

I felt sick with fright and anxiety. 'Come on,' I said to Chris, 'we'll have to go back and pick them all up!'

We retraced our steps but found no unused matches. That might have told me that we hadn't actually dropped any. Instead, it only fuelled my anxiety, causing me to think that somehow we'd missed them.

On the drive home I was completely silent. All I could think about were the trees going up in flames and animals burning to death. And I would be responsible for that.

Panic attacks

When I arrived home I told my mum I wasn't feeling well, and went to bed. But I couldn't sleep. I felt sick with fear. I lay awake, shaking and sweating. I had no idea what was wrong with me. After a few minutes I calmed down, but then the thing returned, doubled in strength. I felt I was going crazy – just as my mum had predicted. In fact, in the months ahead I would refer to it as my 'crazy situation'. Of course, looking back, I know that I was experiencing my first panic attack.

Sleepless nights

The feelings I had were horrible, and often they were accompanied by sleepless nights. I lay there wondering what was happening to me, and why. My worries were really interfering with my sleep and the more I worried, the more my sleep patterns went haywire. I would wake up in the night, and immediately the scary thoughts would leap in. I didn't wake up feeling relaxed in the morning; a bad night's sleep only made matters worse.

These sickening feelings and the disturbed sleep went on for a few days. Finally, I plucked up the courage to watch the news and scan through the evening newspapers. There wasn't a single mention of a fire anywhere in the area I'd been camping. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was off the hook. I wondered why I'd been so concerned about it in the first place.

The not-so-lucky kid

My world settled down again – until we went on holiday to Florida later that year. Going abroad with my family, plus my auntie, uncle and cousins, was a really big treat. I was a huge basketball fan and loved everything about America, from sports to training shoes to music. I was hugely excited about going and couldn't wait to get there.

We went to Disneyland and the theme park was packed. There were queues for all the rides. In one queue, I saw a disabled boy in a wheelchair who was allowed to go to the front, and get on the ride before everyone else.

'Lucky kid,' I thought jealously.

As soon as I had this thought, it came into my head that I was terrible for thinking like that. That boy had a physical disability. It wasn't his fault. And he was far from being 'lucky'. But the thought wouldn't go away. From then on, every time I saw a disabled person, a bad word would come into my head; a word like 'bastard'. A terrible word to describe anyone.

After the rides, we went for a meal at a nearby restaurant. I felt destroyed by my thoughts, couldn't eat and said I wasn't feeling very well.

'Straighten your face,' said my dad. *'We've come all this way for a nice holiday and I don't want to see you sulking.'*

'Sorry, Dad,' I said, not wanting to share the real reason for my moodiness.

I desperately wanted to be happy, but my head was buzzing with terrible thoughts. Then I saw a group of old people going by.

'They're bastards, too,' I thought. *'I hope they die.'*

Now I was really tormented by my thoughts, and there was no escape. Wherever I saw people with disabilities and elderly people, my thoughts got worse, the more I tried to push them away. I tried repeating the phrase 'don't think, don't think, don't think' again and again, even muttering it to myself so that I wouldn't be heard.

But I was heard.

'Hey Adam, what's that you're mumbling?' asked my uncle. He'd spotted me muttering under my breath.

'Oh, it's nothing,' I replied. *'I'm just pretending to be a robot ...'*

In short, I was going to great pains to disguise my fears.

Did my thoughts about the elderly and people with disabilities go away once my family's holiday in America was over? No, they didn't. If anything, they got worse.

