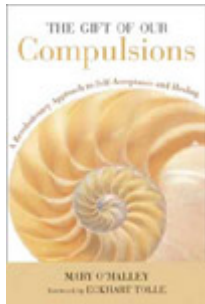


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[July 2005](#)



Back Door to the Heart

Compulsions are paths to self-awareness. (excerpt)

BY MARY O'MALLEY

Ironically, there is practically no better teacher of how to be truly alive than our compulsions. The key to gathering all the wisdom that they bring is to transform our relationship to them. We usually live in reaction, fighting them, giving in, and then fighting again. We live in reaction to our compulsions because we hate and fear them. There is a huge difference between living in *reaction* and living in *response*. We have been trained to react. We think in terms of what should be and what shouldn't be, of what was and what will be. We push and pull, grab and resist instead of responding, instead of listening to our compulsions, learning from them, and bringing the light of our attention to what is happening right now, tapping us into the awesome power of pure curiosity.

What we resist persists. I have a very strong will. Many times I went without eating for long periods of time, only to binge uncontrollably afterward. Many times I thought I finally had this urge to overeat under control. Thank God, I was never quite able to do it. These are very powerful forces that cannot and should not be tamed. If you try to break a horse, you may be able to ride it, but the horse will have lost its spirit. If you discover how to be in true relationship with a horse, it will give you the gift of its wildness and its speed. An example of this truth is shown in the movie *Horse Whisperer*, which was based on Monty Roberts's work with gentling rather than breaking horses.

What works with horses also works with our compulsions. If we try to break them, they have a tendency to "bite us in the butt." But if we learn how to *be in relationship with them*, not only can we heal our compulsions, but we can also be healed by them. It was when I learned how to let go of my hatred and fear of my compulsions and became curious about what was happening inside me that I began to heal and be healed by them. Each wave of compulsion that I was able to be present for dissolved a little more of the prison of my mind and opened the door to my heart. In the beginning I was only able to be there for a moment or two, but

each moment made a difference. Rather than leaving me in deep despair, my compulsive moments began to leave mercy and joy in their wake.

Even though it felt like I paid a high price for my compulsions, in the long run they have brought me much more than they have ever taken away. They didn't allow me to manage and control my way to a temporary healing that kept me separate from the lasting healing that I truly longed for. Crashing over and over against the bulkhead of my own impotence, they narrowed down my options until the only one left was to open up and engage with them. I had to allow them to bring me back to myself—not an idea of what I should be, but a true and loving connection with myself *exactly as I am*. As I was finally able to tell myself the truth of my experience and accept it—rather than being ashamed or afraid—the clouds began to part. I slowly moved from *I am not/I should be* to the wonderful and nourishing experience of *I am!* This has melted so many of what I call the “I am not knots” in my body, mind, and heart, helping me to joyfully open to life again.

Learning how to respond to our compulsions rather than reacting to them is a radically different experience from what we have been taught. To make this shift, it helps to look at the many gifts that we will receive as we learn how to listen to our compulsions rather than living on the pendulum of reaction. Compulsions can show us how caught we are in our heads and reveal to us the futility of domination. It is amazing how much we all believe muscling our compulsions into submission will bring us the healing that we long for, even though evidence exists that it doesn't. Remember the statistic that 95 to 98 percent of all the weight that is lost, plus some, is gained back within a year and a half. And yet diet books are perennial best-sellers. It is also true that the recidivism rate at drug rehabilitation centers and eating disorder programs is very high. And it seems that if we do control one compulsion, often another takes its place. Our compulsions are trying to teach us how to be curious. They will only let go of their grip as we learn how to respond to what is happening rather than reacting. This is a much more effective way to use our minds. Rather than constantly trying to change what is, a person who has learned how to be curious about what is happening, even for just a moment, can move through the thickest of mind states and the most closed of hearts to bring the healing of spaciousness and mercy.

Compulsions open the door back into our hearts, revealing the understanding and mercy that we are so starved for. This is one of the most important gifts that they bring, for it is in the heart that all true healing happens. Compulsions do this by revealing how closed our hearts are to many parts of ourselves. In recognizing how deep our self-judgements are, we are able to meet these disowned parts with mercy. This is the healing we long for, the healing of a loving relationship with ourselves.

Excerpted from **THE GIFT OF OUR COMPULSIONS: A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Acceptance and Healing**, by Mary O'Malley. (New World Library, \$15.)

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