FROM THE FRON TLINES

Breaking the Chains: My Personal Story from Being Imprisoned by OCD to Thriving in Life While Having a Disability

by Kathryn Blalock

Having a disability can be a burden on its own, but throw OCD into the mix and life becomes a whirlwind. It seems impossible to manage the daily struggles of living with a genetic condition and having severe OCD, but nothing is impossible.

I was born with Bardet-Biedl syndrome (BBS). This condition can affect many different functions of the human body, but in my case, my vision is affected the most. I'm blind, having just a 10-degree field of vision, otherwise best described as "looking through a straw." My vision disability exacerbated my OCD symptoms. I could not see what was in my path or if I was clean, and this fear became all-consuming and even paralyzing at times. I also feared losing my remaining eyesight — something completely out of my control. However, I could control how clean I was, and this tiny bit of feeling in control quickly spiraled into severe contamination fears. OCD took away the one, most vital tool I had: my cane. Compared to BBS, OCD was a huge hurdle.

My OCD symptoms started when I was a child, which included hoarding my Barney the Dinosaur toys and wanting things to be "just right." For example, my parents' thumbs had to be exactly on the corners of the pages when they would read me a bedtime story.

As I grew older, I developed contamination fears including fears of raw meat, chicken, eggs, and poop. In middle school, I called my mom daily to take me home to shower because I felt dirty. During high school, I often cried due to high anxiety. I was teased and harassed for my OCD and vision disability. I needed extra-large textbooks with large print. Kids inquired about the big books, sometimes out of curiosity and sometimes to tease me. I hated being different. Classmates noticed that I frequently washed my hands and used hand sanitizer. To annoy me, some would touch my belongings which made them contaminated in my mind. One classmate wore "cow poop boots" to school and would antagonize me. I believed the car was dirty and would insist that my mom clean it. I began to use Lysol spray to counter my fear of contamination, and would spray my backpack and every sheet of paper in it before going straight to the shower. I averaged three showers per day.

My OCD became more severe in college. Every day, I found myself stuck in my dorm room compulsively cleaning until it felt "just right." I missed quite a bit of class, spending my time cleaning. I continuously washed my hands, decontaminated my dorm room, my clothes, and took extra-long showers. Severe OCD was controlling my life to the point where I left college and returned home.

I lived in a complete state of fear. I spent my days isolated in my room, spraying and cleaning nonstop, and showering at least eight times per day. I washed my hands until they bled. I refused to let anybody in my room, and I could not leave it until I was "clean enough." I skipped meals and missed taking important medication because of contamination fears. I avoided the kitchen if meat, eggs, or chicken were being prepared. I would watch like a hawk to ensure no cross-contamination occurred during dinner preparation and that everything got cleaned according to OCD's standard.

After being imprisoned by fear, I made the decision to seek treatment. I deeply desired to take my life back, and it was an uphill battle. I applied to numerous treatment facilities, but I was turned away time and time again. This left me feeling hopeless and frustrated, wondering if I was ever going to get help. Imagine — a young lady is desperate to take control back from OCD, poor eyesight is limiting her chance to get the help she deserves, has had many injuries due to avoidance of using a cane, and has had severe infections that led to hospitalization — what a liability …

Eventually, someone was willing to take a chance on me. I was elated when Neurobehavioral Institute (NBI) in Florida agreed to meet with me. After an evaluation period and working through complicated issues, the NBI staff chose to work with me. They supported me in managing my medical issues and gave me the chance to live again. My journey at NBI began in March 2019. The first step that I had to take was to demonstrate that I could manage my medical issues independently. I was required to demonstrate proficient use of my white cane for the blind; If I could do this, I could stay. So, I did. Using my cane meant accepting that I had a disability. I was terrified of this, but I did it — I accepted my blindness and became proficient with my cane. I developed sufficient independence to begin intense therapy for my severe OCD. I worked tirelessly for six months conquering many fears along the way. The battle was long and hard-fought, yet beyond worth it.

At the start of treatment, powerful OCD prevented me from using my cane, keeping me confined to a life of dependency on others, to a life without freedom, to a dark and lonely world. The most difficult challenge I faced was accepting my disability. It was not easy, but I eventually began to use my white cane, a.k.a. “sh** stick.” As treatment progressed, my acceptance grew, and I became best friends with “sh** stick” as it soon became my newfound independence. I took the first step towards true freedom!

It was incredible to see the real Kathryn come to life as I progressed in treatment. At first, I walked through the doors of NBI like a ghost — shy and dependent, requiring assistance to get anywhere. I had no confidence, and my personality had been completely taken over by constant fear. As I shed the mask of fear over time, that OCD bubble began to burst. My fun, sassy, and confident self started to shine. I continued to gain independence and learned that the control I thought I had was not true control: it was solely OCD controlling me. I found that when I used my cane, I was able to be an independent young woman in control of her life.

Later, I had the privilege of visiting NBI to share my inspiring story with others fighting OCD. It was then that I learned that some of the clinicians worried if I would be okay in the program. I am deeply grateful to all these clinicians who took a chance on me. Without treatment, I would have remained stuck in OCD’s prison.

Clinicians at NBI took an enormous leap of faith when they decided to partner with me on my healing journey. Just look at me now! I am honored to pay it forward and to share my story, hopefully inspiring others on their own journeys. Since learning to manage OCD through an intense treatment program, I am living a more fulfilling life. I babysit, box, and ride horses. I’m involved with IOCDF’s Chronic Illness/Disability and OCD Special Interest Group. I love attending church and being in a small group of wonderful women. I am also excited to have been asked to share my BBS story with others. Recently, I started taking a medication that will hopefully preserve my remaining photoreceptor cells, keeping them healthy in case a treatment becomes available to restore some of my eyesight. Whether this dream comes true or not, I am still able to live life OC-Free because I am in control now, not OCD! ◍

Born a fighter, Kathryn (Kat) Blalock, 28, is a tenacious young woman from Oklahoma. She is a diehard Oklahoma State Cowboys fan and enjoys boxing and riding horses. Kat has suffered from severe OCD her entire life and has a rare genetic disorder which makes her mostly blind.

Currently, Kat is an ambassador for a pharmaceutical company where she shares her experience with her disorder. Kathryn has a huge heart for helping others. You can find more about her inspiring story at ***kathrynblalock.com***.

Learn more about the Chronic Illness/Disability and OCD Special Interest Group (SIG), *and all the other SIGs at* ***iocdf.org/sigs***