

# THE OCD CAMP

An annual woodland retreat offers an innovative intervention for sufferers of obsessive compulsive disorder, says **Stuart Ralph**

The primal energy of a campfire can act as a powerful catalyst for consciousness and connection to the moment as well as to our history. There are signs of human use of fire as early as one million years ago, and although we have innovated and created safer, cleaner sources of heat, our brains have not evolved at the same rate as technology. The human brain is still built for more dangerous times with an amygdala constantly on the lookout for danger. This is also the area of the brain that is thought to be involved in the process of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The amygdala remains vigilant for any signs of danger to our physical existence, and in more modern times that includes emotional uncertainty and threats to our social status.

Deep in the Surrey countryside, eight adults with OCD have gathered around a campfire to share their stories and receive words of validation and compassion from their peers. The fire helps to keep them engaged in the moment without dropping into the compulsive cycle of rumination and avoidance, actions that maintain OCD. Time seems to stand still. The fire is symbolically cleansing, turning darkness into light. Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, hope grows in those sharing their lowest lows that even in the aftermath of the 'fire' of OCD there is life.

The idea of an OCD camp was pioneered by US therapist Dr Peter Weiss and colleagues to offer sufferers an integrated approach to the

treatment of OCD beyond the narrow National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guideline therapeutic recommendations of CBT with exposure and response prevention (ERP),<sup>1</sup> with nature as a therapeutic frame and a community of people who 'get it'. My connection with Peter Weiss started in 2016 when I interviewed him for my podcast, *The OCD Stories*. He talked about the annual camping trip he had run for people with OCD for more than 15 years in a picturesque pine tree forest in the Pacific Northwest, just outside of Seattle. I had been fascinated by the idea of an OCD camp since seeing a two-part BBC documentary on Weiss's work, *Extreme OCD Camp*, following six British teenagers who took part.<sup>2</sup> After the podcast, Peter offered to help me set up an equivalent camp in the UK, and the first one happened in 2018. It was life changing both for the participants and for myself. Since the annual camps resumed post-COVID in 2022, I've run them with fellow therapist Jonny Say.

The woodland setting invites the campers into the moment through their senses - the birdsong in the morning, the crunch of twigs underfoot, the fractal patterns of the branches and the smell of essential oils from the trees. It helps them feel safe and contained by offering an anchor to the present, away from the demands of daily life and technology so that they can find connection with the environment and their peers. The rooted and uprising trees feel like supportive, wise elders ever present and reliable, year after year.

The woodland's shadows, its emptiness and silence, can also be a container for projections of monsters and nightmares. Nature offers new triggers for people with OCD, allowing for therapeutic work to happen *in vivo*. These triggers can range from contamination fears around the hygiene of the forest floor: 'Is that bird poo?'; aggressive intrusive thoughts because of the presence of knives: 'What if I lose control?'; and cooking for others for those with harm thoughts: 'What if I accidentally poison the food?' Scary new experiences offer the opportunity to face fears. The camp is a triad of containment - a three-way relationship between the aliveness of the woodland, the therapists and the campers, and each part of this triad in its own way encourages the campers to challenge themselves around their OCD.

## People who 'get it'

OCD can be stigmatising and shame inducing as the person experiencing obsessive compulsive difficulties often has troubling, sometimes taboo thoughts. This can leave them feeling isolated and afraid to share their thoughts in case of repercussions or embarrassment. Thoughts come on an array of themes including contamination, sex, violence, or anything ego-dystonic. And then there are the hours of compulsions - it can feel impossible to explain the need to do compulsions to someone who doesn't understand OCD. Over the years, I've heard

many participants say that the camp is the first time they have met someone else with OCD, and that it's such as relief to feel 'normal'.

At camp there is no need to explain or justify their thoughts, or reassure with a caveat of 'I would never act on them', or 'the thoughts are disgusting to me'. Instead they share freely, for most people for the first time. The greatest benefit of the camp is not the therapeutic skills, woodland or activities - it's the relationships formed over the three days. It's common for staff to witness campers becoming at ease within the first few hours of the first day, talking with each other like lifelong friends. I believe the woodland setting aids this openness and communication, inviting us in without judgment. Each cohort has remained in touch, with one cohort also organising several weekends away together. It is a level of community I never predicted when starting the camp, and a testament to the power of sharing stories in a safe and contained space.

## Integrated therapy

NICE guidelines recommend CBT that includes ERP as the first-choice therapeutic treatment for OCD. In my private practice, at least 50% of my caseload at any given time are children and young people experiencing OCD symptoms. ERP is my standard treatment and it has helped many clients immensely, in some cases taking them from being heavily avoidant and housebound to enjoying life again. But ERP is no panacea and a recent meta-analysis study found that ERP was no more effective than other active forms of psychological therapy, suggesting that while it provides an important foundation, a more integrative approach is needed.<sup>3</sup> Structured ERP at the camp is limited to one hour on day two, mainly to show what it is about for those who have never experienced it. This has given some campers the confidence to try ERP after camp. The bravery that is shown during this hour is also a wonderful example to others, demonstrating that OCD-related fear is almost always an illusion.

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Nature is a finely tuned system of interconnection and, I believe, so should therapy be for OCD. The therapeutic elements of the camp rest on the three pillars of nature, connection and growth. Nature provides the container and a healing environment, while connection is created by the opening up around campers' stories - stories often kept deep down mired in shame.

The last pillar is growth. The OCD part of the brain, which is fixed on protection from perceived danger, be that physical or mental, is concerned with survival, not growth. This often results in the sufferer losing out on opportunities and their world becoming smaller, with some even being housebound. The growth element of the camp is about building up courage and pride, achieved through experiencing survival skills such as matchless firefighting, a high ropes course or woodland crafts. Therapists are on hand to help guide campers through this process when they are feeling resistance.

Other therapies are integrated throughout. Rogers' core conditions are present from the moment of the first interview all the way through to any post-camp follow-ups. We draw on acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) skills to build psychological flexibility, and compassion-focused therapy (CFT) to help the campers start to build their compassionate self and reduce shame. Learning and practising these skills over the three days increases the chances that they will be practised when camp is over.

My co-therapist Jonny and I recently had a follow-up video call with many of last year's campers to find out what's stayed with them and continued to help them since the camp. The main feedback was that they continued to disengage from their thoughts, and to put less importance on them. Many of the skills we teach focus on achieving this psychological flexibility. Creating distance from the content of the thoughts can also help improve the outcome of other therapies such as ERP.<sup>4</sup>

The spirit of community also remains, with the campers supporting each other through WhatsApp groups, being cheerleaders for each other as they make progress in overcoming their fears.

For recovery to be lasting, people need to find out how to balance what gives with what takes away, just like nature works in harmony with itself. ■

## REFERENCES

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About the author

**Stuart Ralph MBACP** is an integrative child and adolescent counsellor and psychotherapist in private practice. He founded *The OCD Stories* podcast in 2015, a weekly show that has amassed five million downloads globally. In 2018 he was given the hero award for his OCD advocacy by the International OCD Foundation. His master's research, 'Brief humanistic counselling with an adolescent client experiencing obsessive-compulsive difficulties: a theory-building case study', with Professor Mick Cooper, was published in the January 2022 issue of BACP's *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research* journal. [www.stuartralph.co.uk](http://www.stuartralph.co.uk)