

Healing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, A Personal Account by Mike Mossey

For most of my life I've been coping as best I can with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). In my case, my obsessions are about scary thoughts, like being persecuted by some kind of inner monster. And my compulsion is "messing with" my body... by which I mean fixating on it and clenching and unclenching compulsively.

I've had these obsessions and compulsions from as early as I can remember. I have a little story to illustrate what it's like. This isn't an actual memory, but it describes how OCD would be experienced by a very young child. Imagine that I were a baby in a stroller. My mother is taking me on a walk. I enjoy the scenery until suddenly I see a shape, perhaps a jagged leaf, that causes anxiety. Many babies (and adults) would quickly look away. What I would do, what many people with OCD would do, is stare at the leaf and have increasing anxiety.

OCD can be described in different ways, but a nice succinct definition I like is that it's a tendency to move toward or fixate on thoughts that cause anxiety, rather than move away. The world seems scary, and a person with OCD often feels like there is no escape. Or perhaps they have never known anything else... the world just seems bad.

In this essay I will describe the benefits from ATM. OCD is considered a brain chemistry disorder, and an inherited disorder, but I'd like to report that ATM helps enormously.

I also want to describe how ATM didn't help me as long as I was doing it obsessively and compulsively. Several events changed how I did ATM around 2019 and that made all the difference.

Early in life, I didn't realize I had OCD. It was just such a part of my experience that I never realized there could be another way of experiencing life. Fortunately I found a good psychiatrist in 1995 who recognized the OCD and started me on medication, which initially helped reduce the OCD by maybe 30%. The medication was Anafranil, a tricyclic anti-depressant. At the time Anafranil was the gold standard for OCD. To improve more, it took 25 years of experimenting with different medications until I found one in 2019 that improved the situation by perhaps 60%. This is extended-release Luvox (an SSRI). Curiously, regular (non-extended release) Luvox only helped a little.

Finding the extended release Luvox was the first event that made it possible to do ATM effectively.

But I've been encountering Feldenkrais for a long time. Between 1995 and 2018 I worked periodically with Ralph Strauch here in the Los Angeles area. I went to him for chronic pain issues. From time to time I worked with him intensely. But these sessions didn't help OCD much. I still wasn't very aware of the effect compulsions and obsessions had on my life. If I had

a new or fresh experience through an FI, I might obsessively analyze it to death, so it wasn't really putting me in a non-habitual situation long-term.

I also did ATM from time to time. I even joined the 2007 San Diego training for the first two years, until I couldn't do the ATMs any more due to some pre-existing chronic pain.

The San Diego training got more enthusiastic about ATM, but it was not helping as much as it should have, because I was doing the ATM obsessively and compulsively. I might repeat a certain ATM often enough that it wasn't functioning any longer (it wasn't putting me in a non-habitual state). Or I might obsess about doing the ATM "the right way" to the point I couldn't be open to new experiences.

In OCD, the overwhelming feature of the habitual state is obsessing and acting compulsively. And I wasn't fully aware of that, so I wasn't able to use ATM to change my habitual state yet.

I was also involved in another healing modality from 2000 – 2010, which is Buddhist meditation. I did a lot of sitting meditation. Again, because I was doing this compulsively, it wasn't really changing my habits. I understand now, after better understanding ATM, that the moment I sit down in the familiar sitting posture, I am already putting myself into the powerful grip of habit.

So the first big event that changed my perspective was the extended-release Luvox. The other big event was discovering how much I liked tutoring math and computer science. Tutoring is a form of meditation, because it requires me to come back to the present moment. In tutoring, the central focus is the attention to the student, and that's what I need to come back to over and over. Unlike sitting meditation, it works. I think that's true because it's an interpersonal situation.

My anxiety levels dropped significantly after I started tutoring. Then I began to do daily ATM in the summer of 2019, mostly from recordings (Mark Reese, Elizabeth Beringer, David Zemach-Bersin, Ralph Strauch, and others). To my surprise, I was discovering this openness and deep relaxation. It was really putting me into a non-habitual state! I still sometimes work obsessively and compulsively, but over the past two years I've learned a lot about how to avoid that.

When I'm doing ATM obsessively, in effect I "have a strategy." That means I'm not just doing the movements, but attempting to do them in "the right way." Feeling a need to do something "in the right way" is a core habit for me. It's a way that I try to reduce anxiety, by assuring myself that I'll make fast progress. But it only makes things worse.

Feldenkrais gave some strategies for ATM, like doing small movements or paying attention to the smoothness of the movement. What I've learned is that it's helpful not to think of these things as a plan for what I'm supposed to do, but rather to be open to spontaneously noticing them.

But it's easy for me to turn those into rigid strategies, in particular fixating on movement to check if it's "correct." One of my OCD compulsions is checking the state of my body, constantly wondering if it's okay.

Gradually I've learned to abandon those kinds of strategies and do ATM with truly light effort and without checking for correctness. It wasn't one single decision to abandon strategies; I have to keep making that choice over and over. As I do ATM I may discover little strategies or ideas that seem to help for a time. But eventually my intuition tells me it's time to let go. And that always feels like a little bit of grief. I guess the pull toward compulsions is so strong that I feel like something major is lost when I let go of them.

How has ATM improved my life?

It has reduced the obsession on the scary imagery. I think it's interrupting the somatic component of the pattern. I've noticed that small movements of my eyes participate in visual imagination. When I can find some freedom in my eyes through doing eye-related ATM, the visual imagination calms down. I can actually go into difficult experiences now, places and times that I used to fixate on the worst imagery you can imagine, with a sense of a peaceful "mental screen." (A sense that no imagery is being projected on my imagination.)

It seems that my nervous system's innate capacity to balance itself is working here. In the same way that most ATM will perturb a habitual pattern and bring out the self-regulating capacity, even in the case of OCD, a genetic disorder, the nervous system wants to self-regulate. Despite the fact that people with OCD often don't understand what is happening, there is some part of me with insight into the situation and a wish to balance it.

A way that OCD has reduced compulsions is making me more aware that I'm entering into a habitual state, or that I'm going down the rabbit hole, so that I fairly naturally want to stop going in that direction. It used to be that I was totally immersed in the habitual state so I didn't have any clear sense that it was getting better or worse; I didn't have a navigation system. Now, I will notice that I'm compulsively clenching or fixating on my body, and I'll realize that it's getting me nowhere. Even though it's very hard to stop, I know that I have a tool to help me once I can get to a place to lie down (ATM). If I'm driving or not able to do ATM in the current situation, I can avoid making the problem worse.

It occurred to me recently that my method of doing ATM, letting go of strategies, is similar to a Zen technique that some teachers described to me, which is "just sitting." I didn't understand at the time, but now I think that when a Zen teacher says you should "just sit," they mean something like "don't sit with strategies about how to do it right, just sit." When I'm doing ATM I try to enter into a space with no expectations, no strategies, and no plan. And I make sure that intention doesn't turn into a strategy itself. ATM is an effective tool for doing this, far more effective than sitting still ever was.

I'm age 52, and my life is getting better. I have never been so optimistic, and I expect continual improvement throughout the remainder of my life. I have so much appreciation for Moshe and for everyone who has worked to spread the wisdom of the Method.