

GoodHealth

A NEW Channel 4 two-part documentary is set to put the spotlight on obsessive-compulsive disorder, thought to affect 2-3 per cent of the UK population. Many sufferers keep their condition hidden, but here CHARLOTTE DOVEY talks to former IT consultant Ashley Fulwood, 32, whose life, until recently, revolved around an obsession with cleanliness.

UNTIL just two years ago, I spent at least three hours in the bathroom every day. While most people would be happy with a quick shower, I had to spend two hours in the bath washing every part of my body three times. As soon as I got out of the bath, I'd spend another 40 minutes or so in the shower.

I'd get through two bars of soap every day, countless bottles of shampoo and shower gel and, despite knowing this wasn't 'normal' behaviour, I couldn't stop myself.

The first memory I have of obsessive-compulsive behaviour was when I was about ten. The condition can manifest itself in many different ways and change regularly, so my first sign was hoarding magazines. I kept years worth of them 'just in case'.

As I turned 11 or 12, I began to feel I had to keep my desk at home and school spotless, and every object had to be at a certain angle or I couldn't rest.

Bizarrely, for a non-religious person, I also started saying the Lord's Prayer every evening. I had to repeat it three times without interruption or I couldn't sleep.

It started to be more of a problem when I was 17 and I began to have an obsessive fear of contamination from the outside world — particularly public toilets.

I believe the catalyst for this was my first job, working in the motor industry. The longer I worked in the oily, spare parts department the worse it became.

Every evening I spent hours in the bathroom decontaminating myself. If my brother interrupted me I'd have to start again. Then do it two more times to complete the ritual.

I knew this wasn't logical, but I decided I could deal with it, didn't need help, and simply had to get on with my life.

Medical experts are divided over the causes of OCD. One school of thought is that the condition is caused by a chemical imbalance within the brain due to low levels of neurotransmitters — chemicals that act as messengers between cells in the brain and the nervous system.

The second theory is that a person develops learned negative thoughts and behaviour patterns due to certain life experiences. For example if a person once became unwell after visiting a laboratory he or she may go on to develop a fear of being contaminated by toxic substances.

At 26, I moved to London to work as an IT technical support consultant in the City, and gradually realised I didn't have much of a life.

The stress of a new flat, new friends and new job made it worse. I was so concerned with being contaminated when I was out that I couldn't wait to get home at the end of the day to wash.

On particularly bad days, I'd get through the door feeling such panic I couldn't relax until I'd taken off my

Ashley used two bars of soap a day, spent five hours washing and wore only new clothes. Like millions, he was imprisoned by obsessive compulsive disorder... until now



Picture: PAGE ONE

clothes, put them in a bin bag and thrown them away.

This happened at least five times in two years and the replacement of suits, shirts, ties and shoes cost me thousands of pounds. But I was prepared to go through this because, in my mind, they would never be clean again. Equally, there were occasions when three hours just wasn't enough to get rid of all the germs.

My record, if you could call it that, was walking through the bathroom door at 6pm and not coming out again until 11pm.

With this daily ritual, I had no social life or girlfriends. In retrospect, it would have saved a lot of heartache to simply tell people what was going on. But like most OCD sufferers I found it difficult to talk about.

Not only did I find it embarrassing, but I believed people would label me weird or tell me to 'snap out of it'. I was trapped by this condition. As much as I wanted to be normal, the OCD wouldn't let me. It was a complete mental block and as difficult to resolve or rationalise as a fear of heights or flying.

It wasn't until I saw an episode of Casualty, when I was 27, that I knew my condition had a name. It

was a revelation. I made an appointment with my GP and thought he'd solve all my problems in a ten-minute consultation.

But when I told him I thought I had OCD, he said rather irritably: 'What's that?' I walked out of that surgery feeling extremely alone.

Determined not to give up, I decided to go through my private health insurance. With their help I was referred to The Priory Hospital in Southgate, North London.

DESPITE the stigma attached to seeing a psychiatrist, I willingly went along for an hour a week. The treatment they offered was Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a 'talking treatment' which identified how negative thoughts affect us and then looked at ways of tackling them.

I learned a lot about the condition, but CBT didn't work well for me. After six weeks I decided I'd got as much out of the treatment as I could. But I didn't want to go down the anti-depressant route.

Fortunately, after hours of research on the condition and chatting to other sufferers at the hospital and on the internet, I was recommended the self-help book *Brain Lock: Free Yourself From Obsessive-Compulsive Behaviour*, by Dr Jeffrey Schwartz.

It is based on a cognitive behavioural therapy which has four steps: Relabel, Reattribute, Refocus and Revalue.

The goal of step one is for the sufferer to recognise intrusive thoughts and urges as obsessions and compulsions. In step two you must reattribute the thought or urge to its real cause — a biochemical imbalance in the brain.

The aim of step three is to refocus attention on more constructive behaviour, and the final step is about revaluing the obsessive thoughts so you realise they are not worth paying attention to.

It wouldn't work for everyone, especially as you are dealing with the disorder on your own, but it was a real eye-opener for me.

After hours reading the book, and with the support of other sufferers, I started to have the confidence to reduce my washing time.

Instead of spending three hours in the bath, I'd spend two. Instead of washing every part of my body three times, I'd try to do it once. And eventually I broke the cycle when, late one evening, I told myself I was simply going to use the bathroom, wash my hands and go to bed.

In that instant, I knew I was stronger than the OCD which had ruled my life for more than 20 years.

This strength and knowledge enabled me to give up my job and set up a Nottingham-based charity devoted to people affected by OCD, providing information that previously was scant.

It's been two years since my breakthrough and I believe I'm 95 per cent cured. Of course, I still wash my hands a little longer than most people; but reducing it to just 20 minutes is a miracle for me.

I now have a social life, can use a public toilet and, most importantly, can live like any other normal 32-year-old.

■ *FOR more information on OCD, visit www.ocduk.org or call: 0870 126 9506.*

■ *THE House Of Obsessive Compulsives, Channel 4, 9pm, August 1 and 8.*

5 MINUTE FITNESS

A rapid routine from JANEY HOLLIDAY. This week: Cardio

1 MIN STAND with feet together, arms by your side, take your right leg out to the side and both arms to shoulder height, then bring your feet back together, arms down. Repeat on left.

2 MIN START as before, but jump both feet and take both arms out to the side, and jump back to the start. Make sure your heels are down and back is straight.

3 MIN START with feet together, arms by your side, take one foot back reach up with both arms, bring your foot back to the start and arms back to your sides. Repeat with other leg.

4 MIN STAND with your right leg in front, lean forward, and with your left arm reached out and up in front of you, swop legs and arms by jumping up and changing feet.

5 MIN LEANING slightly forward, jog on the spot as fast as you can. This really gets the heart rate up so take care if you are a beginner. Keep your feet light and soft on the ground.