EXERCISE 9
THE VULNERABLE SELF-THEME IN OBSESSIONAL STORIES

The vulnerable self-theme leads you to give credibility to obsessional doubts. In a way, the OCD tries to do its best to undermine your confidence in yourself exactly in those areas of your life that are meaningful and important to you. Note that the self-theme is a doubt (‘Maybe I could be the sort of person . . .?’). Like the OCD doubt it is almost certainly not grounded in real experience. We are not saying this is the cause of OCD. The ultimate cause of OCD is still very much unknown. But for some reason, this self-image of yourself as someone who could ‘be contaminated’, ‘forget to lock the door’, or ‘have blasphemous thoughts’ has taken on a life of its own seemingly beyond your control. Possibly someone repeated it to you or maybe other types of experiences have contributed to this self-image. If you were not concerned with who the OCD says you might be, then you would be unlikely to have obsessions in that area.

So how do you go about changing a self-image of self-doubt? A good place to start is to be aware of exactly what the OCD says that you might be, and also, what the OCD says that you might not be. Start by writing down a story of all those things that the OCD says you might be. Use your main obsession as described on the worksheet, such as ‘I’m the sort of person who could get sick if I’m not careful’ or ‘I’m the sort of person who doesn’t know enough’. Next, try to expand as much as possible on all the reasons you could be the type of person as dictated by your OCD. After you have written down this story about who the OCD says you might be, write a second story. But this time, write down the reasons that show this story about you is unfounded. For example, if you wrote down in the previous story ‘I’m the sort of person who could hurt others’, then you write down in the second story ‘I’m the sort of person who is kind and considerate to others’. If you wrote down a reason why you are one sort of person, then write another reason in the second story why you are not that type of person, as dictated by the OCD.

Put both stories next to each other and look at both stories from a common-sense point of view. Which of the two stories really resonates with you when looking at it calmly? In all likelihood, the alternative story is likely to be far more accurate. Take your two stories with you to your therapist for the next session, and share your insights with your therapist as to who you truly are.

Another exercise which is part of your training card is to reposition yourself in the way you use language to describe who you are. Beware of any automatic phrases, metaphors or sayings which you might habitually use to reinforce your position in the world as someone ‘more likely to make mistakes’ or ‘more likely to experience bad things’, etc. Every time you find yourself saying things to yourself that reinforce the vulnerable self-theme of your OCD, you can reposition yourself by describing yourself in a different language and placing yourself in a different position regarding the world and its events, for example:

I probably goofed again.

versus

I almost certainly did not goof again.

I’m just not capable of doing a job competently the first time.

versus

I’m capable of doing as good a job as anyone else.

I’m floundering in a mud bath.

versus

I’m like a bird flying though the sky.