The fear of losing control and its role in anxiety disorders

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Credit: Concordia University

Did you lock the front door? Did you double-check? Are you sure?

If this sounds familiar, perhaps you can relate to people with [obsessive-](#)

[compulsive disorder](#) (OCD).

Help may be on the way. New Concordia research sheds light on how the fear of losing [control](#) over thoughts and actions impacts OCD-related behaviour, including checking.

Although more traditional types of fear—think snakes, spiders, dogs, etc.—have been well investigated, this is one of the few studies to focus primarily on the fear of losing control.

"We've shown that people who believe they're going to lose control are significantly more likely to exhibit checking behaviour with greater frequency," says Adam Radomsky, a psychology researcher in the Faculty of Arts and Science.

"So, when we treat OCD in the clinic, we can try to reduce their beliefs about losing control and that should reduce their symptoms."

The study

Radomsky's findings were published this October in the *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders*, co-authored with PhD student Jean-Philippe Gagné.

It's the first in a series of related projects Radomsky is undertaking, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

"The 133 undergraduate students who participated were given bogus EEGs. They were randomly assigned false feedback that they were either at low or high risk of losing control over their thoughts and actions," explains Radomsky, Concordia University Research Chair in Anxiety and Related Disorders.

Next, participants were given a computerized task—trying to control the flow of images on a screen by using a sequence of key commands. At any time, they could push the space bar to check or confirm the key sequence.

Those who were led to believe that their risk of losing control was higher engaged in far more checking than those who were led to believe that the risk was low.

'Something we can treat'

Surprisingly, the students who participated in the study did not self-identify as having OCD.

"If you can show that by leading people to believe they might be at risk of losing control, symptoms start to show themselves, then it can tell us something about what might be behind those symptoms in people who do struggle with the problem," Radomsky says.

"This gives us something we can try to treat."

The findings were consistent with what he and Gagné expected.

"We hypothesize that people's fears and beliefs about losing control may put them at risk for a range of problems, including panic disorder, social phobia, OCD, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and others," Radomsky adds.

"This work has the potential to vastly improve our ability to understand and treat the full range of anxiety-related problems."

  More information: Jean-Philippe Gagné et al. Manipulating beliefs about losing control causes checking behaviour, *Journal of Obsessive-*

Provided by Concordia University