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### *High Anxiety: A New Approach to What Explains Compulsive Behavior*

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**Citation:** Seth Mnookin. "High Anxiety: A New Approach to What Explains Compulsive Behavior." New York Times Book Review 122, 11 (March 2017): 20 © 2020 The New York Times Company

**As Published:** <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/books/review/cant-just-stop-sharon-begley.html>

**Publisher:** New York Times Company

**Persistent URL:** <https://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/123431>

**Version:** Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

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High Anxiety: A New Approach to What Explains Compulsive Behavior  
By Seth Mnookin  
March 8, 2017

CAN'T JUST STOP  
An Investigation of Compulsions  
By Sharon Begley  
296 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$27.

A few weeks ago, I was trying to complete a crucial report. The day before it was due, I spent the afternoon relabeling hundreds of tracks in my 68,000-song iTunes library. The next morning, I put together a spreadsheet of two dozen USB hubs that included links to each product's best and worst online reviews. That night, after I'd missed my deadline, I stayed up until 1:30 a.m. creating a chart of all of the pens I currently own.

I've always had a penchant for this type of behavior, but it didn't begin to interfere with my life until I got sober two decades ago. Over the years, I've been given a diagnosis of everything from depression to attention deficit disorder. But what if all of my self-sabotaging and self-destructive behaviors, regardless of what form they took, had the same pathology? What if my compulsive drug use and compulsive organizing and, for that matter, anything that I've felt compelled to do, were all attempts to quiet the unceasing drumbeat of anxiety that is forever pounding out its rhythm in my brain?

That, in essence is the hypothesis behind "Can't Just Stop," Sharon Begley's new book. "We cling to compulsions as if to a lifeline," she writes in the introduction, "for it is only by engaging in compulsions that we can drain enough of our anxiety to function." Begley's use of the first-person plural is not just a rhetorical device — according to her, while the type of behavior I exhibit might be on the extreme end of the spectrum, the human condition is all but defined by a ubiquitous anxiety that would cripple us if our compulsions did not give us the illusion of control.

Begley, a senior writer at The Boston Globe's life sciences publication Stat, is among the best there is at translating complex science for a general audience. On the whole, "Can't Just Stop" is fast-paced and engaging without being simplistic, and Begley shows admirable restraint in eschewing news-you-can-use prescriptions for how to improve your productivity or otherwise better your life.

Begley is strongest in passages where she uses her reportorial eye for detail to unpack complicated ideas with a few choice examples. Take her description of the neurochemistry behind the seemingly irresistible draw to check our phones or try for one more level on Candy Crush Saga. Every now and then, doing so results in an unexpected reward (I once got a job offer via Twitter direct message), and when that happens, the dopamine system goes wild.

Now, the next time our phones vibrate, we're primed for another bounty: "Once you get a taste of the pleasure that awaits you, your reward-expectation circuitry lights up like a winning slot machine." When there's no payoff, dopamine levels crash. Calling the dopamine system the reward center of the brain is, according to Begley, incorrect. "Activity in the dopamine circuit is not so much about pleasure as about expecting pleasure, and when we don't get it, we feel driven to seek it out, desperately and compulsively."

There are many of these absorbing and satisfying vignettes sprinkled throughout the book. After illustrating how painful obsessive-compulsive disorder can be to those in its grip, Begley elegantly explains the difference between compulsive behavior and O.C.D. For someone with a compulsion, the behavior itself is a coping mechanism for anxiety; that's why so many hoarders find their conduct comforting while those around them view it with alarm. For those suffering from O.C.D., the anxiety is a bridge between the obsession and the compulsion; someone whose fear of germs causes him to wash his hands until they bleed knows his behavior is irrational but is powerless to stop himself.

Ultimately, however, Begley undercuts herself with the sort of sweeping, overgeneralized assertions that seem to be endemic among popular science books these days. Her facile tendency to view historical figures through the lens of her subject matter is, at times, almost farcical. Hemingway once said, "When I don't write, I feel like crap" (he actually used another word). From that sentence, Begley concludes that his work "sprang not, or not only, from a deep creative impulse and genius . . . but from something deeper, darker, more tortured." The comedian Joan Rivers improbably leads off a chapter about compulsive do-gooders: Begley frames Rivers's continuing to work a full slate of gigs until she died in 2014 at age 81 as a need to bring joy and laughter to the masses (or at least "a few dozen well-lubricated customers in a dark Times Square club").

Even more confounding are those times when Begley fails to provide readers with enough evidence for her claims. In one section, she refers to "numerous studies" that support her main thesis: that "anxiety can compel people to create a minuscule piece of their world over which they have some control." The single study that she actually cites, however, has a pretty glaring design flaw. In it, test subjects were given a small objet d'art. Half of the subjects were then informed they'd need to give a talk on their object to an art expert; the other half were told only to look and think about their item. At the end of a set amount of time, all of the participants were told to clean the pieces they had been given.

When the subjects who were told to prepare a presentation spent more time cleaning their artifacts, the study's authors interpreted it as an attempt to "regain a feeling of control." That conclusion would be more convincing if all of the test subjects thought they would need to present their object to an expert; since they did not, an equally plausible conclusion is that people are more conscientious about assigned tasks when they think an authority figure will see the result of their effort, regardless of whether they're also anxious about an upcoming speech.

Unfortunately, there's no way to know if the other studies Begley alludes to are more persuasive: For some inexplicable reason, she neglected to include source notes, a bibliography or any supporting material whatsoever. I'm well aware that not everyone shares my compulsive need to know why writers are confident their conclusions are correct — but with readers of serious nonfiction becoming increasingly scarce and more and more people swayed by fantasy, it's crucial that those of us who still believe in facts show why it is that we're trustworthy.

Seth Mnookin, the director of M.I.T.'s graduate program in science writing, is the author, most recently, of "The Panic Virus."