

The Woman who Thought Too Much

by Ali George

The woman speaking is poet Joanne Limburg. She looks like a Cambridge academic ought to:- slim, with glasses and mousy brown hair and nervous. Some might describe it as neurotic.

Limburg has just written a book on her twenty-year struggle to overcome Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and she is at the Edinburgh Science Festival to talk about her experience of the illness.

In spite of the fact that, in gender terms at least, sufferers are fairly evenly split, the audience of around sixty is predominantly women. Some are sufferers, some are carers of sufferers and some are just interested.

She opens with a thought experiment.

“Say in your head, I wish ‘insert name of a loved one here’ would die in a terrible accident. Not pleasant, is it?”

Some members of the audience are visibly distressed.

Limburg explains that this is the kind of trigger that can overcome an OCD sufferer with anxiety. Despite the rational knowledge that thinking something does not make it happen, the brain goes into overdrive and the person then feels compelled to go through a series of steps to make the anxiety go away. This may consist of tapping three times on the desk, or phoning the loved one for reassurance that they definitely have not died in a terrible accident. Several times.

Another aspect of the condition manifests itself in perfectionism, which stems from a need for absolute certainty in all things. If you are a perfectionist, you might take ages

over something and be frustrated or angry when you can't get it right. If you suffer from OCD, it's more likely you'll be so anxious about getting it wrong that you won't even start.

This tendency to overthink meant that Limburg struggled at university, failing to write anything down in case it was wrong. Writing poetry removes this element of stress, because there is no right way to do it.

"And I've always liked mucking about with words," she smiles. "Writing a poem is like being in a word sandpit."

All in all an interesting glimpse into the world of someone who has learned to live with a complex brain disorder.

Joanne Limburg's new book, *The Woman Who Thought Too Much: A Memoir* is out now.