

Professor Makes NSU a Prime Resource for OCD Treatment

BY ELLEN WOLFSON VALLADARES

OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD) often evokes images of excessive hand washing or the need to fanatically arrange items in a particular order.

While those behaviors can be part of the disorder, Jedidiah Siev, Ph.D., assistant professor at NSU's College of Psychology since 2011, wants people to know that OCD is a serious, complex disorder that includes a wide spectrum of behaviors and often severely impairs the lives of those who suffer from it. He also wants people to know that help is available and the word has been spreading since Siev brought his expertise to NSU three years ago and added the NSU OCD and Related Disorders (NORD) program to the already existing NSU Anxiety Treatment Center. He is currently the director of the Anxiety Treatment Center and NORD program.

"OCD is a disorder that interferes with people's lives. The good news is that our treatments work well. They are not always easy to do, but the efficacy rates are very high. It is incredibly rewarding to work with people whose lives are so impaired and who you can help make such a huge difference in their lives," he said.

Since it opened, the NORD program has treated more than 130 patients, not only with OCD, but also with other, perhaps less well known, disorders such as hair pulling, skin picking, and Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a preoccupation with a perceived defect in one's physical appearance. Because of Siev and the NORD program, these patients are receiving the most current, best-researched treatments, which mostly rely on a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy called "exposure and response prevention."

Under Siev's supervision, doctoral students from NSU's College of Psychology provide a treatment plan that includes progressively exposing the client to his or her fears in order to reduce anxiety. "We are trying to help people learn that they can allow for anxiety. Studies show that, of the people who complete a full course of exposure and response prevention, 75 to 85 percent benefit tremendously from it," Siev said.



"We are asking people to face their biggest fears."

Siev learned much about these effective treatments during the more than eight years he spent working with some of the nation's leading experts in the field of OCD and related disorders. After graduating from Yale University with a bachelor's degree in psychology, Siev took a couple years off and then attended graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a master's degree in psychology and his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. It just so happened that many of the leading researchers in OCD and related disorders were in the Philadelphia area, and Siev got the chance to work with many of them, igniting a lifelong passion for the subject.

In addition, Siev completed a one-year internship and a two-year, postdoctoral fellowship at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School in the OCD and Related Disorders Program, where he again trained with several renowned OCD researchers and clinicians.

Meanwhile, having Siev at NSU has also attracted students like Lori Merling, a fourth-year Clinical Psychology Ph.D. student who currently is one of the coordinators for the NORD program. "I came here specifically to work with Dr. Siev," said Merling, who discovered Siev's research while getting her bachelor's degree at McGill University in Montreal.

While she majored in humanistic studies, Merling said she always knew she wanted to work with OCD patients and was immediately drawn to Siev's research.

"I knew someone when I was growing up who suffered from OCD, and I saw firsthand how it affected that person and the person's family," Merling said. "Dr. Siev draws people in. I know so many people who got interested in OCD and the clinic because they took a class with him."

Keith Lit, a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the clinical psychology program, became inspired to delve deeper into OCD

that touching objects in the therapy room, such as the light switch, was extremely dangerous to him.

"When Dr. Siev came into the session, he empathized with all the client's fears and quickly shifted the conversation to talk about change and pursuing goals. It was a great lesson for me in understanding how to balance the roles of the warm, supportive listener and the challenging, demanding coach," said Lit.

According to Siev, NSU has been the ideal place to move forward with his work. Previous research was funded by a grant from a private donor and a grant from the International OCD Foundation. He continues his research with two NSU President's Faculty Research and Development Grants. And, he enjoys the fact that NSU allows him the opportunity to research, as well as teach and do the clinical supervision.

"I am getting to do so many different things—research, teaching, clinical supervision. I do a lot of all three," he said.

Aside from his work at NSU, Siev loves to spend time with his wife of 15 years, Brendy, who teaches English at NSU University School, and their four children, ranging in age from 6 to 14.

He hopes the Anxiety Treatment Center and NORD program will continue to be an exceptional training facility for students and become more widely known as a valuable South Florida resource. "I'm hoping that we can do a lot in terms of making this gold standard treatment available to everybody who needs it, whatever they can afford," Siev said.

Siev also wants to see NSU become the resource for Body Dysmorphic Disorder, which even fewer people know about. He believes the program can help alleviate a lot of suffering, as these disorders can be so debilitating that people often lose their jobs, marriages, or children.

"We can help people transform their lives in a way that they will say, 'I never thought my life could be like this,'" he said. "It's so rewarding to help people get their lives back." ■



Jedidiah Siev and Ivy Rouder, a graduate student in psychology, discuss how to treat a patient with anxiety about being outdoors.

and related disorders when he took a class with Siev about treating anxiety disorders. "During class, he would sometimes role play with students to demonstrate the technique or approach he was teaching. I remember marveling at how precisely he could implement the technique while still sounding genuine and conversational, which is so hard to do," Lit said.

For Lit, one of his best moments working at the NORD program was when Siev joined him for a session with a client, who had severe contamination OCD. The client was very reluctant to engage in exposures because he strongly believed