

In My Own Words

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tarting out as the comedian who got belly laughs from audiences simply by inflating a surgical glove and wearing it on his head, 54-year-old Howie Mandel became an actor; the creator of the animated television series Bobby's World; and currently, the squeaky clean, fist-bumping host of NBC's Deal or No Deal.

Even though he was living his life in the public eye, no one knew that Howie had reached success all the while struggling with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), an anxiety disorder that affects more than three million Americans. Symptoms like recurrent, unwanted thoughts and repetitive or "ritualistic" behaviors, like constant hand washing, can take up hours every day and cause a great deal of distress. These types of symptoms plagued Howie, but he kept them to himself. "The stigma of mental illness kept me

from telling anybody about it," he says, "even my family and closest friends."

> But today, Howie lives with Terry, his wife of 30 years, and is raising

two daughters, 17-year-old Riley and 25-year-old Jackie, and a son, Alex, 21. He is open about his OCD. "It is a hurdle for me to get over every day," Howie says. "But I'm a highly functioning person with OCD—and I've got therapy, medication, and a lot of love and support to thank for it."

Stepping out in the open

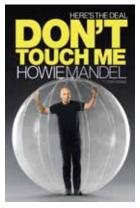
In his new book, Here's the Deal, Don't Touch Me (Bantam Books, 2009), Howie talks about what it was like to grow up in Kingston, Ontario, feeling like an alien with undiagnosed OCD and a fear of uncleanliness and germs, called mysophobia. "The thing is, I came by it naturally," he explains. "I grew up watching my grandmother wax her concrete exterior porch who does that?" Howie's mom would meticulously scrub anything in the house if a stranger touched it.

"I wasn't just afraid of



"The stigma of mental illness kept me from telling anybody about it."

germs—I was paralyzed by that fear," he emphasizes. "If I were Superman, the lid on the laundry hamper would be my kryptonite. If I did touch it, I'd spend forever in the shower scrubbing myself." In his



family, Howie notes, his behavior was viewed as "quirky." It was simply, he says, what made him Howie.

But he had more discomfiting rituals. "Even if I knew a door was locked, I'd check it 10 times or more to make sure it was." Howie's own doorknobs were likely to be the only ones he touched. In fact, it was a doorknob that actually led Howie to out his

OCD on air during the 1990s. "I was doing a late-night radio show appearance and I refused to touch a doorknob on the set," he explains. "During the interview, I let it slip that I had OCD—it devastated me. I thought it would destroy my career and embarrass my family."

But in truth, that slip ended up helping Howie feel more comfortable about his OCD. "A listener came up to me after that show aired," Howie explains. "He said, 'I suffer from that, too,' I realized I was not an alien-and I didn't have to feel lonely anymore."

An end to isolation

Howie learned then that there were many other people with OCD, who, like him, felt lonely and isolated. "After that listener approached me, I felt so comforted and realized that maybe I could make a difference—give other people that comfort."

That led Howie to

start making public service announcements urging awareness and treatment of OCD (to view, go to www.adaa.org and put "Howie Mandel" in the search box). With his book, and his high profile, Howie often talks about his illnesses on talk shows like Late Show with David Letterman, and his goal is always to destigmatize OCD, mysophobia and other mental illnesses, and to urge people to get help. "I still live with OCD

every day—it's part of who I am," he says. "But I learn how to deal with it." His message for other people living with OCD? You can get treatment and learn how to live with it, too.

-Gina Roberts-Grey

Red Flags

Huge chunks of time can be lost every day to OCD, an anxiety disorder that propels people with the condition into an endless loop of obsessive and compulsive behaviors. Obsessions are uncontrollable thoughts associated with various fears; compulsionsuncontrollable repetitive actions-are often attempts to ease anxiety. Most sufferers fall into one or more of the following five categories:

Fear of contamination. Washing hands repeatedly-many times a day-and excessive cleaning (floors, rooms, etc.) are related compulsions. This fear can also cause avoidance-in shaking hands or touching objects others have touched.

Fear of harm or danger. Safety can be such a major concern that it requires checking a door lock many times to be sure that it is locked, or repeatedly checking a gas or electric burner to be sure it is off.

Fear of discarding objects. Also known as "hoarding behavior," this compulsion involves collecting things-newspapers, canned foods, plastic containers. The belief is that something bad will happen if these objects are thrown away.

Fear of imperfection. The fear shows up as a need to do things perfectly, like making a bed or having impeccable personal grooming habits. If everything isn't done perfectly, the fear is that punishment or catastrophe will result.

Fear of disorder and superstitions. The need for order and symmetry is paramount and shows up in behavior such as making sure all labels on canned goods are facing out and perfectly aligned. Superstitions about certain numbers and colors also persist.

For more information about OCD, go to www.mayoclinic.com.