

Lecture Sheet

Othello Syndrome

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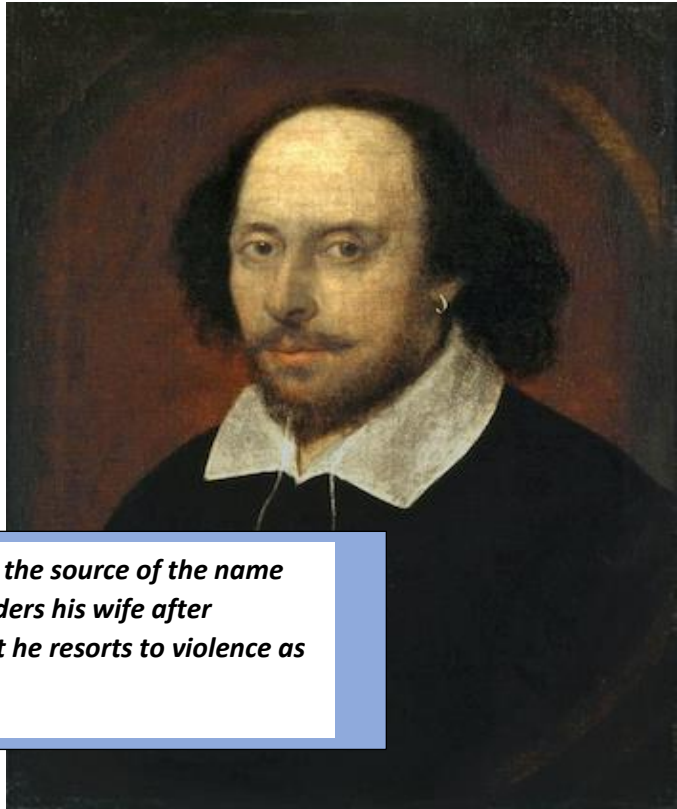
What is Othello Syndrome?

Othello Syndrome (also called **morbid jealousy**, delusional jealousy, pathological jealousy, sexual jealousy, or Othello psychosis) is a mental health disorder in which someone is convinced that their romantic partner is being unfaithful without any proof. In other words, someone affected by Othello syndrome imagines that their partner has cheated on them and becomes obsessed with their partner's fidelity. Some of the most common signs of Othello syndrome are:

- Repeated accusations that their romantic partner has been unfaithful without the ability to prove these claims
- Attempts to exercise excessive control over their romantic partner, such as monitoring their online behaviors or controlling their daily schedule
- Expressing an unhealthy focus on their partner's fidelity, especially when this focus affects their and their partner's daily life
- Expressing a desire or plan to harm themselves or their partner or seek other forms of revenge
- Domestic violence, physical abuse of other members of the household (including children), or emotional abuse

Those who are affected by Othello syndrome experience obsessive, intrusive, and/or delusional thoughts, particularly about their partner's imagined cheating. **Obsessive** thoughts are those which are recognizably unreal but prompt a compulsive response, such as constantly contacting the suspected romantic partner. **Intrusive** thoughts appear as inevitable thoughts that cannot be pushed out of the mind, prompting responses that most often involve limiting the suspected partner's autonomy. **Delusional** thoughts are not recognized as unreal, so they are not addressed within the mind. Actions prompted by delusional thoughts are often illogical or dangerous because they are not based in reality. All three of these types of thoughts can occur in isolation or combination. Suspicions about a romantic partner's fidelity alone are not indicative of Othello syndrome. Like most mental health disorders, when the symptoms begin to negatively affect someone's daily life, professional help should be sought.

The name Othello syndrome comes from William **Shakespeare's** play *Othello*. In the play, Othello murders his wife, Desdemona, because he has been convinced of her unfaithfulness by Iago, the play's main antagonist. Othello is first convinced of the infidelity when Iago suggests that Cassio (one of Othello's officers) appears to be suspiciously fleeing Desdemona when he sees Othello approach. Othello uses this as evidence that Cassio and Desdemona must be engaging in a romantic affair together. This is similar to the way that people suffering from morbid jealousy can invent examples of evidence to "prove" infidelity. Also, like Othello, violence is often the outcome for those with morbid jealousy, and usually their partners are the victims.



The play Othello by William Shakespeare is the source of the name Othello syndrome. In the play, Othello murders his wife after becoming so obsessive over her fidelity that he resorts to violence as a means of control.

Causes

There are several common causes associated with Othello syndrome. It should be noted, however, that there is not a universal cause. Psychologically, anyone who has another mental health disorder that also manifests through jealousy is at risk of developing Othello syndrome as well. Further, experiencing a delusional state can also cause someone to develop Othello syndrome. In this case, the thoughts associated with the imagined infidelity tend to be delusional in nature. Schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder are associated with Othello syndrome, for example. People with deep personal insecurities can also have a higher chance of developing Othello syndrome, especially if they form insecure attachments to others.

There is a correlation between the use of alcohol and drugs with the development of Othello syndrome. Because alcohol and drugs are mind-altering substances, they can increase the severity and frequency of intrusive, obsessive, or delusional thoughts. Alcoholism is not only linked to development of morbid jealousy but also acts of domestic violence. Cocaine and amphetamines particularly are linked to Othello syndrome because elements of delusion developed during intoxication can persist after the effects of the drugs have stopped. Continued consumption of alcohol or drugs can not only contribute to the development of Othello syndrome, but it can also worsen symptoms.

Triggers

In the context of psychology, a trigger (or triggering event) prompts an overwhelming emotional response that can worsen or reveal symptoms of a mental health disorder. Those who are affected by or are predisposed to Othello syndrome can be triggered by various forms of perceived infidelity. In male-female romantic relationships, men tend to be triggered by perceived physical infidelity, such as sex or sexual favors, kissing,

or touching. Women tend to be triggered by perceived emotional infidelity, or the development of a deep interpersonal relationship with someone else. Because Othello syndrome involves delusional and obsessive thoughts, even the romantic partner's insignificant and innocent actions can be perceived as evidence of infidelity. For example, deviating from an expected schedule, texting a friend or colleague, or engaging in conversation with someone of the opposite sex can appear as "evidence" of cheating to someone with Othello syndrome, triggering their delusional response.

Other mental health disorders can also trigger Othello syndrome, especially if the other disorder relates to jealousy, obsession, and/or delusion. Experiencing one type of delusion or delusional thought can establish other delusions, so serious disorders like schizophrenia or borderline personality disorder can trigger Othello syndrome in some cases. As with Othello's case of Iago's manipulation, another person could also trigger behaviors associated with Othello syndrome by suggesting the alleged infidelity without proof.

The Theme of Jealousy in Othello



Throughout Shakespeare's *Othello*, jealousy is apparent. The tragedy *Othello* focuses on the doom of Othello and the other major characters as a result of jealousy. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, jealousy is mainly portrayed through the two major characters: Iago and Othello. It utterly corrupts their lives because it causes Iago to show his true self, which in turn triggers Othello to undergo an absolute conversion that destroys the lives of their friends.

Othello represents how jealousy, particularly sexual jealousy, is one of the most corrupting and destructive of emotions. It is jealousy that prompts Iago to plot Othello's downfall; jealousy, too, is the tool that Iago uses to arouse Othello's passions. Roderigo and Bianca demonstrate jealousy at various times in the play, and Emilia demonstrates that she too knows the emotion well. Only Desdemona and Cassio, the true innocents of the story, seem beyond its clutches. Shakespeare used the theme in other plays, but nowhere else is it portrayed as quite the "green-eyed" monster it is in this play. Since it is an emotion that everyone shares, we watch its destructive influence on the characters with sympathy and horror.

How jealousy works in Othello

Shakespeare's Othello is very close to the Aristotle's conception of tragedy, specially in respect of the portrayal of the protagonist Othello. Like a classical tragic Othello in the tragedy Othello falls from his position due to his his 'tragic flaw' jealousy. Jealousy is the main tragic flaw that brings about Othello's misfortune, suffering, and death. Though this flaw is fuelled by the external force like the witches in Macbeth, but jealousy seems to have a deep root in Othello's character.

Jealousy is the main factor that appears to destroy Othello. Iago is the initiator of the chain of events that sparks jealousy in Othello, and eventually leads to the downfall of not only the main character, but also of most of the significant characters in the book. In Othello Shakespeare presents us with the tragic spectacle of a man who, in spirit of jealous rage, destroys what he loves best in all the world. We will be able to best realize the tragic effect jealousy if we consider first the nature of the relation between Othello and Desdemona. The marriage between Othello and Desdemona is a real 'marriage of true minds', a true love based on a mutual awareness and a true appreciation of each other's worth, a love that has in it none of the element of sensual lust. The love of Othello and Desdemona transcends the physical barriers of color, nationality and age. But this love is destroyed as soon as jealousy enters into the mind of Othello.

It is Iago who plants the seeds of suspicion and jealousy in Othello's mind. In Act III: Scene 3, Cassio speaks to Desdemona, asking her to intercede with Othello on his behalf. Desdemona willingly agrees, knowing that Cassio is an old friend of Othello's. She promises to speak of him with her husband repeatedly until the quarrel is patched up and Cassio is recalled.

In the meantime, Othello and Iago enter and Cassio, who is embarrassed because of his antics the previous night, embraces Desdemona and departs. Iago seizes the opportunity to make an undermining comment — "Ha, I like not that" — that rankles in Othello's mind. Iago further insinuates that Cassio was not just leaving, but that he was "steal[ing] away so guilty-like" (39). Iago's words here are filled with forceful innuendo, and as he pretends to be a man who cannot believe what he sees, he introduces jealousy into Othello's subconscious.

Desdemona greets her husband and, without guilt, introduces Cassio's name into their conversation. Here, fate plays a major role in this tragedy; not even Iago wholly arranged this swift, coincidental confrontation of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio, and certainly the pathos of Desdemona's position here is largely due to no other factor than fate. Desdemona speaks of Cassio, and Othello, to please her, agrees to see him, but he is distracted by his private thoughts.

As Desdemona leaves, Othello chides himself for being irritated by his wife. Lovingly he sighs, "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul, / But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (90–92).

A conversation follows between Othello and Iago, in which Iago continues to imply that he knows something that he refuses to divulge, Othello denies that he would give himself over to jealousy. In his denial, he shows himself most vulnerable. He is consumed with doubt and suspicion. Othello voices his old fears that Brabantio was right, that it was unnatural for

Desdemona to love him, that he was too horrible to be loved, and that it could not last. Iago leaves, and Othello contemplates his situation: He could be tricked, married to a woman who is already looking at other men, and he fears that he must wipe her out of his heart. He tries to tell himself that it is not true.

Iago also urges Othello to recall that Desdemona deceived her own father by marrying Othello. To Brabantio, Desdemona pretended to be afraid of Othello's dark looks; she pretended to shake and tremble at Othello's exotic demeanor, yet "she lov'd them [Othello's features] most" (207). The implication is clear; Iago does not have to state it: If Desdemona deceived her own flesh and blood, she might just as naturally deceive her husband.

When Desdemona re-enters, Othello's aspect is changed; he watches her intently, looking for signs, and brushes away her handkerchief when she seeks to sooth him. They go in to dinner, and Emilia picks up the fallen handkerchief, one that her husband, Iago, often urged her to steal from Desdemona. Emilia decides to have a copy made to give to Iago, but he enters, sees the handkerchief, and snatches it from her.

When Othello enters, Iago sees that Othello cannot regain his peace of mind. His speech is fevered, sweeping and frantic; he believes that his wife has been unfaithful to him. Othello then turns on Iago with savage intensity and demands to see the proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Cornered, Iago produces the dream story: Cassio spoke in his sleep, embraced him, called him Desdemona, and cursed the Moor. Iago tells Othello that he has seen Cassio wipe his brow with a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries; Othello recognizes this handkerchief as the one he gave to Desdemona.

Othello dismisses love and calls for vengeance. Certainty has freed his mind from doubt and confusion. Now he swears action, and Iago swears to help him. Othello wants Cassio dead, Iago agrees to do it, and then Othello wonders how to kill Desdemona.

The fire of jealousy is further inflamed in Othello in Act III: Scene 4. When Othello enters, he claims a headache and asks her for a handkerchief to bind his head, but he will have only the embroidered strawberry handkerchief. Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief and tries to deflect his questions about the handkerchief, speaking again of Cassio. Othello walks out in fury.

But Othello is totally engulfed by his jealousy in Act IV: Scene 1, in which he sees his wife's handkerchief in the hands of Cassio's mistress Bianca. It is, for Othello, the "ocular proof" he sought. He is now convinced of Desdemona's infidelity and knows he must kill both Cassio and Desdemona that very night. This is the second time Othello has sworn to kill both Cassio and Desdemona.

Othello goes directly to the point: "How shall I murder him, Iago?" Othello swears also to kill his wife this night, he curses her and weeps over her at the same time, mingling love and murder: "for she shall not live; no, my heart is turned to stone . . ." (178–179). Still Othello knows the pull of love and asks for poison so that he might kill her at a distance, but he sees justice in Iago's idea of strangling her in her bed, imagining that she has dishonored that bed. Again the agreement is made: Iago is to kill Cassio, and Othello is to kill Desdemona.

Thus we see how the passion of jealousy ,which derives from pride and breeds anger ,gradually gains control over Othello and destroys his initial nobility,so that he finally turns into the black beast that he was at first unjustly accused of being.The decline in the moral and spiritual stature of Othello goes hand in hand with the destruction of his love for and faith in Desdemona.

Iago, “most honest” in the eyes of his companions, is, in fact, truly the opposite. His feelings of jealousy uncovers his actual self. Jealousy divorces Iago from rationality and this loss of rational causes Iago to make a life of jealousy and plots to destroy Othello. Although Iago has a reputation of being “full of love and honesty” ,he is responsible for destroying many lives and is considered “perhaps one of the most villainous characters in all literature” .Iago alludes to Othello that his wife, Desdemona, has been unfaithful with Cassio. Iago initially intends to hurt Othello and make him regret appointing Cassio as his lieutenant; however, he ends up hurting others in the process. Iago’s jealousy causes his true character, one of “vicious [ness]”, to become noticeable. This, in turn, creates a new Othello to emerge, one “utterly possessed, calling out for blood and vengeance”.

The theme of jealousy is prominent throughout the play as it motivates the characters’ actions. The major characters of Iago and Othello clearly possess this jealousy and show how it affects them. Iago is forced to expose his actual nature and Othello undergoes a total transformation from a normal human to a spiteful monster. Obviously, jealousy does cause people to change in horrific ways. The dramatic irony is that the most jealous indignation is expressed over offenses that did not happen: Othello jealous about his wife; Bianca jealous about Cassio; Iago formerly jealous about Emilia. Each character attempts to cope as an individual, except Emilia, who has a theory that jealousy is a constituent part of masculinity. The evidence before her own eyes backs up her assessment.