

HEALTH



She's an expert on OCD at Penn. It still took a while to recognize the disorder in her 5-year-old son.

Emily Becker-Haimés, an assistant professor in the psychiatry department within Penn's Perelman School of Medicine, helps children with obsessive-compulsive disorder.



Emily Becker-Haimés is clinical director of the Pediatric Anxiety Treatment Center at Hall Mercer, a clinic in Center City that assesses and treats children and adolescents with anxiety disorders and obsessi ... [Read more](#)
Courtesy of Penn Medicine



by Wendy Ruderman

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Emily Becker-Haimés' son had just turned 5 years old when she and her husband began to realize his fear of bugs or his request specifically for “five hugs” felt different.

“Was this developmental normative behavior where kids benefit from routines and rituals? We tried not to overpathologize,” said Becker-Haimés, a child clinical psychologist. They soon realized their son had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

Becker-Haimés is clinical director of the [Pediatric Anxiety Treatment Center at Hall-Mercer](#) (PATCH), a speciality clinic in Center City that assesses and treats children and adolescents with anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), tics, and [trichotillomania](#) (hair pulling). PATCH is part of the [University of Pennsylvania's](#) health system.

“I’m an OCD specialist. I’ve been working with kids with OCD for almost 13 years,” [Becker-Haimés said](#). “It still took me some time to recognize what was going on for my own kid.”

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Becker-Haimés, who described herself as not one to share personal information, said she made the “really hard decision” to talk to The Inquirer about her experience as a parent of a child with OCD to help other families and

encourage them to seek help quickly. Earlier treatment leads to better outcomes, she said.

The conversation with Becker-Haimes has been edited for length and clarity:

What is OCD?

It is like a cousin to anxiety disorders, and oftentimes, people have both OCD and anxiety. It's also one of the most misunderstood psychiatric conditions that exist. Its characteristic features are a combination of: obsessions, which are repeated intrusive or unwanted thoughts or images or urges; and ritualistic or compulsive behaviors, meaning repetitive behaviors that people have to do over and over again, such as the need to constantly reorganize, recheck, or redo things. The key feature is the thoughts and behaviors start to take up more and more time. People experience these intrusive thoughts repetitively and have to engage in these rituals in order to feel safe and comfortable. It can take up hours and hours of people's days.

At what age does it start and how can parents recognize it?

We see OCD emerge as young as 4. The average age of onset is preteen or early teenage years. In younger kids, we often see a lot of reassurance seeking or needing to ask parents the same question over and over again or needing them to say certain things in certain ways. Parents often get drawn into their rituals. Parents find themselves walking on eggshells and feeling like they need to do the same thing in the same way over and over again for reasons that don't seem to make sense. The child is very anxious or distressed when those rituals aren't followed — that can be an early warning sign. With teenagers, some signs could be if you see them engaging in repetitive behavior, like odd showering or bathing patterns or feeling like they are getting stuck.

How did you come to recognize it in your son's behavior?

At first I thought some of it was just curiosity about how food was prepared or how electrical cords work. It took a month or two before I started to realize, these are the same questions. The answers that I'm giving don't seem to satisfy him. In fact, it's just leading to the questions coming up more and more. What we saw in our child was a lot of questions around mealtime, about whether food had been cooked appropriately. He was unwilling to eat until we were able to answer questions about food and it progressed from there to needing us to have to take a bite of the food before he was willing to eat it because he was afraid that something was wrong with it and it would make him sick. That's an example of how parents can sometimes get drawn into rituals. Sometimes OCD can look like temper tantrums. For us, that's how we saw a lot of things — as temper tantrums that seemed nonsensical and totally out of scope to what was happening.

What steps did you take to help him?

One of the tricks we often use with kids is to help them name their OCD as something they can kind of talk back to. For him, we called it 'tricky brain,' trying to boss him around. We said, 'What is tricky brain saying to you right now? What do we know is true? How can we boss tricky brain back and be brave?' We use lots of rewards. After a couple of months of trying things on our own, we reached out to another OCD expert so we could get him more specialized support. That's been really helpful for us.

Do you have advice for parents?

There's no doing this work perfectly. I know how to coach parents. I know what to do and there are moments as a parent that my head is, 'Why are you yelling at your child? This is ineffective.' It is ineffective, but you're also a human being and parenting any child is difficult. [Parenting](#) a child with OCD has a lot of

stressors and challenges. Connecting with others who have gone through it or are going through it is a really important part of that journey.

We try to make kids feel better in the moment because we're parents and we want our kids to feel better. But when it's coming from a place of unhelpful anxiety or intrusive thoughts or obsessions, we're actually not helping our child, we're helping the OCD. The sooner you can try to break up some of those rituals, generally the better the course for the child.

The term 'OCD' is often misused to describe a person who is simply neat or organized. What do you think about that?

It speaks to how misunderstood OCD is. There's so much stigma in our culture. There's so much of our language as a whole that's based in 'othering' mental illness — 'Oh, I'm crazy. I'm a lunatic.' All this comes from a place of stigmatizing and othering those who are struggling with serious mental illness. We're moving in a direction where we're being more thoughtful about the words that we use. I'm hoping OCD will be the next frontier.

For caregivers interested in learning more, Becker-Haimes recommended the International OCD Foundation's website: <https://iocdf.org>.



Wendy Ruderman  

I'm an investigative reporter who is committed to bringing light (and sometimes heat) to broken systems and wrongs.



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OPINION



Medical Mysteries: What was triggering her outbursts and confusion?

Sure, she was a mom of two young children and a teacher. But being busy and a little overwhelmed didn't explain sudden episodes of morning nausea, severe hunger, and emotional upset.

Sandra G. Boodman, Washington Post



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Paul Jablow, For The Inquirer

ELECTIONS



‘City folks’ who moved to Philly’s fast-growing suburbs could help Kamala Harris defeat Donald Trump in Pa.

Population growth in the outer Chester and Montgomery Counties have helped Democrats. Whether they can keep up and expand on that momentum could determine who wins Pennsylvania in November.

Katie Bernard and Aseem Shukla

ARTS & CULTURE



Longtime curator Anna Dhody resigns from the Mütter Museum

Dhody has launched her own institute to research historical medical collections in ways that she said are no longer welcome at Mütter.

Rosa Cartagena and Rita Giordano

PHILADELPHIA NEWS

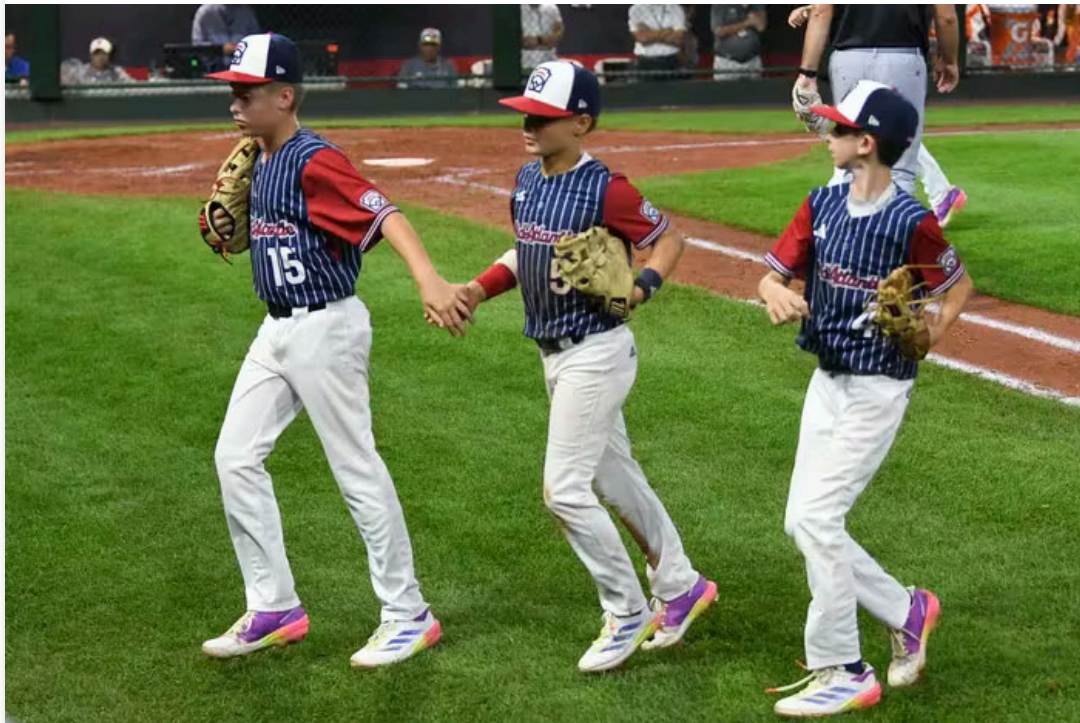


JD Vance gets a cheesesteak at Pat's

Candidates ordering a cheesesteak during their visits to Philadelphia is a longtime election season tradition.

Jesse Bunch and Nick Vadala

SPORTS



Council Rock Newtown stays alive in the Little League World Series with a rout of the Northwest Region squad

Council Rock Newtown won 12-2 in a weather-delayed elimination game Sunday.

Staff Reports

HEALTH



How Philly's heat wave poses medical risks

Extreme heat poses risks for all ages. Here's what to watch out for.

Tom Avril

PHILLY TIPS



Your guide to this year's turkey trots

5K runs, fun runs, and short walks happening before Thanksgiving dinner.

Jillian Wilson

HEALTH



Pictures of the 37th annual AIDS Walk Philly

Participants in the 37th annual AIDS Walk Sunday winded along Kelly Drive from the Art Museum, helping raise money to provide emergency funds to individuals living with HIV disease and increase public awareness.

Tom Gralish

CORONAVIRUS



Penn mRNA scientists Karikó and Weissman win Nobel Prize

Research by Katalin Karikó and Drew Weissman paved the way for two COVID-19 vaccines: the ones by Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech. Their work has won the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

Tom Avril, Sarah Gantz, and video by Lauren Schnei...

HEALTH



Hemophilia was once a death sentence, but modern medicine has made advances in treatments for the genetic bleeding disorder

Hemophilia is caused by missing proteins called clotting factors that are needed to form blood clots.

Terri Akman, For The Inquirer

HEALTH



Black women weigh emerging risks of hair straighteners

Mounting evidence now shows that chemical hair straighteners could be a health hazard.

Ronnie Cohen, KFF Health News

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Strep throat can easily be confused with throat infections caused by viruses — here are a few ways to know the difference

Many people incorrectly assume that all sore throats are due to strep throat.

Allen Shaughnessy, The Conversation

HEALTH



Tuberculosis on the rise for first time in decades after COVID-19 interrupted public health interventions and increased inequality

The pandemic not only interrupted important health interventions for tuberculosis, it also caused a decrease in social and economic opportunities for marginalized people around the globe.

Carlos Franco-Paredes, The Conversation

HEALTH



As low-nicotine cigarettes hit the market, anti-smoking groups press for wider standard

The first authorized cigarettes with 95% less nicotine than traditional smokes are coming to California, Florida, and Texas in early July, after a year of test-marketing in Illinois and Colorado.

Don Thompson, KFF Health News

HEALTH



The DEA relaxed online prescribing rules during COVID. Now it wants to rein them in.

Controlled medications include many stimulants, sedatives, opioid painkillers, and anabolic steroids.

Arielle Zions, KFF Health News

HEALTH



Abramson Senior Care is reinventing itself again after selling its nursing home and other businesses

The Montgomery County not-for-profit founded in 1866 sold its home care and hospice businesses this past spring, but is trying to develop a new way to serve seniors.

Harold Brubaker

OPINION



One Penn resident weighs in on union vote | Opinion

For some residents like myself, this process was filled with conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Juan Lopez Tiboni, For The Inquirer

OBITUARIES



Morris Husbands, celebrated medicinal chemical research and development scientist, has died at 85

He won awards for helping to create the drug venlafaxine in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It relieves symptoms of depression, anxiety, and nerve pain, and is now used worldwide.

Gary Miles

PHILADELPHIA POLITICS



Some Philly workers will get longer paid parental leave, but officials acknowledge it's still not enough

The city of Philadelphia is expanding paid parental leave to six weeks for thousands of city workers in the coming year.

Anna Orso

HEALTH



‘Chemo brain’ is real, but there are ways to ease it

Doctors are still learning about why many — but not all — cancer patients experience cancer-related cognitive impairment (CRCI) or "chemo brain."

Andrea Atkins, Washington Post

OPINION



How poor air quality and other climate change issues should change the way doctors treat patients

Even without smoke from Canadian wildfires, Philadelphia is ranked by the American Lung Association as one of the cities with the worst air quality.

Alex Nisbet, For The Inquirer

CLIMATE

Expect a hot, smoky summer in much of America. Here's why you'd better get used to it.

Forecasters say the only break much of America can hope for anytime soon from eye-watering dangerous smoke from fire-struck Canada is brief bouts of shirt-soaking sweltering heat and humidity.

Seth Borenstein, Associated Press

PETS



ACCT Philly shelter gets \$100,000 X-ray facility for injured dogs and cats

Injured animals will get faster medical care with on-site X-ray examinations instead of having to be transported to a veterinary facility.

Robert Moran

PENNSYLVANIA POLITICS



Gov. Josh Shapiro quietly recalls pick for Pennsylvania Department of Health secretary

Gov. Josh Shapiro has recalled his nomination for Pennsylvania Department of Health secretary: Dr. Debra Bogen, a pediatrician who had led Allegheny County’s Department of Health.

Gillian McGoldrick

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