



positive mind control

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The first time James Avant IV ate one of his own creations he got sick. Fresh goo from his Doctor Dreadful Squeemy Snack Lab was to blame. At the tender age of eight, the future founder and CEO of OCD Cakes was drawn not to cooking but to concocting. Visions of sugarplums were not dancing in his head. Avant was doing science.

As a teen, his curiosity-driven experimenting turned into an intense quest after he suffered a horrible reaction to medicine he had received for a migraine. The experience, and his desire to prevent it from happening to others, was the catalyst for his studying neurobiology—the science of how cells in the nervous system create circuits that process information and mediate behavior. By the time he graduated from high school, Avant had co-authored papers and worked at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center as a student intern and research assistant.

It was at the University of Cincinnati that Avant’s investigative nature prompted his pivot from medicine to baking. Like his interest in medicine, his interest in baking was connected to his desire to mediate his own neurobiological behavior. His preoccupation with protecting himself from germs and chaos was becoming untenable. Though he had been covertly battling with obsessive-compulsive disorder for years, it began to rage on the front lines of his daily life during his time at UC. Baking was one of the few pursuits that brought him peace. When a doctor turned professor asked his students to really think about why they were pursuing medicine, Avant came to a realization.

“The day I decided to no longer pursue a career in healthcare, I was sitting in my first anatomy/physiology class. The professor shared [that], though he had been practicing for fourteen years, his heart was no longer into general practice but teaching—so he became a professor. He shared how he didn’t want any of us to be doing this for the wrong reasons. So I closed my notebook, got up, and dropped the class.”



“Not at that moment?” I asked, incredulously.

“Yeah, I did. Literally.”

Avant’s spontaneity was not as flippant as it sounds. He was still as driven but moving in a different direction. He registered for A Non-Designers Guide to Graphic Design—a course offered through UC’s College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning. He had taken Sculpture for Non-Majors the previous semester.

“I was learning how to view design as a tool for communication. This goes back to my scientific brain . . . it’s like positive mind control in a sense. That I, or anyone, get to influence how people perceive something.”

He understood the why of his medical mission early on, but figuring out the why of his baking career took some time. It emerged through participation in CO.STARTERS, a course offered through ArtWorks that “helps aspiring entrepreneurs put ideas into action and turns a passion into a sustainable and thriving small business.” A facilitator with the program prompted a discussion, which led Avant to his why.

“She revealed to me later that she struggled with bipolar disorder. She was encouraging me to figure out why my business does what it does.” This talk, coupled with Simon Sinek’s *Start with Why* TED Talk, was the primary ingredient for what has become Obsessive Cake Disorder.

“OCD Cakes exists to take a bite out of the stigma surrounding mental health through cakes. When you think about cake, you think about celebration, positivity, comradery, relishing in good moments. Negativity and worry are far in the distance.”

It’s positive mind control through cupcakes, changing perceptions about how people look at cakes as well as mental illness.

Connecting people to themselves, each other, and creating a community through cooking is another major why for Avant. He’s eager to break down barriers to talking and cooking.

“I think we have a lot of commonalities as humans. Finding common ground for us to come together in whatever capacity is important to me. I love people, and I love food.”

Avant also loves when clients give him a blank slate.

“I really like when my clients give me creative freedom, and I truly believe my best work has been in the eleventh hour. I don’t feel as proud about the things I plan out. I love spontaneity.”

Another way he asks why is by drawing inspiration from atypical places.

“I saw a commercial for McDonald’s french fries. So I created a sweet potato shortbread french fry with a rosemary-honey glaze. I was like, ‘Why can’t I have something super simple like french fries taste as good as cookies?’ So I did that.”

This spirit of spontaneity has helped him work through the urge to give into OCD rituals despite the anxiety that he sometimes feels. Baking has empowered him, and he’s eager to see how it can inspire others. Giving a portion of his profits and time to various mental-health initiatives keeps his mission in the mix.

Although Avant traded his life in a lab coat for one in an apron and wields a spoon instead of a scalpel, he’s still very focused on the intersection of science and healing. He dispenses prescriptions for better mental health not through a pharmacy but through a kitchen, where minimalist designs blend with bold flavors, where tasting leads to talking, and where cooking creates community—one cake at a time.