

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

What is OCD?

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a mental health disorder rooted in anxiety which can start as early on as childhood. In fact, about 8 in 10 people with OCD experience symptoms before the age of 18. OCD consists of patterns of obsessions and compulsions which can change overtime and vary in severity. Symptoms of OCD are often impacted by stress and can fade during low stress periods and increase or worsen during periods of high stress. An **obsession** refers to unwanted and recurring thoughts or mental images and a **compulsion** is a strong urge to repeat specific behaviors. Obsessions can lead to compulsions due to the fact that acting on the compulsion usually brings about temporary relief from the stress or anxiety that the obsession causes. The cycle these experiences create can cause distress, get in the way of daily tasks, or change how a person functions or their lifestyle.



Signs and Symptoms of OCD

Common obsessions and compulsions include:

Obsessions:

- Fear of germs
- Fear of forgetting or losing something
- Wanting to have things exactly how you want them or in order
- Thoughts of hurting others
- Unpleasant or inappropriate thoughts

Compulsions:

- Excessive cleaning or washing
 - Handwashing, cleaning the house/room, avoiding physical contact, etc.
- Repetitive arranging or organizing
 - Organizing clothing by color, arranging items so that they are symmetric, rewriting lists or assignments, etc.
- Repetitive counting
 - Counting steps, counting to a certain number, repeating actions such as touching a doorknob or looking at alarm a specific number of times, counting items, etc.
- Repetitive checking
 - Checking if the stove is off, doors are locked, faucet is not running, checking for mistakes, etc.
- Following ridged routines
 - Difficulty with change or feeling as if you need things to be the way that you want them to be.

It is important to remember that as humans, we all have habits, routines, urges, and repetitive thoughts once in a while, but if these thoughts or behaviors are becoming uncontrollable, causing distress, getting in the way of daily tasks, impacting quality of life, or disrupting how we function, it may be time to seek out support

How to Manage OCD

- **Detect warning signs early on:** Noticing changes in your behavior and/or increased stress and anxiety can be important to understanding the cycle and triggers of OCD.
 - Common warning signs include significant changes in routine, difficulty sleeping, wanting things the way that you want them, difficulty managing strong emotional responses, need for reassurance, questioning oneself or having concerns, repeating behaviors, etc.
- **Be patient with the process:** Working towards managing OCD is not change that will happen overnight, be patient and kind with yourself and the process.
 - Identify people who you can turn to for support such as friends or family members.
 - Remind yourself that making progress is a process and if you do not see change right away, that is okay! Keep working towards adding tools to your toolbox to manage OCD.
 - Recognize and celebrate progress! Acknowledging and appreciating any progress, no matter the size, is important.
- **Delaying compulsions:** Stopping yourself from acting on your urges and compulsions can be difficult. Delaying compulsions can help you take steps towards rejecting these behaviors.
 - Delaying your compulsions by recognizing the urge and then giving yourself a timeline by stating to yourself, “I will wait 2 minutes and then see how I feel” or “I will wait until after class and see how I feel”.

- While delaying compulsions, be sure to use distractions such as calling a friend, listening to music, or reading a book to distract your mind from the urge to complete the compulsion.
- It is okay to start off small and delay your compulsions for a minute or two. As time goes on and you are able to continue delaying your urges, increase the time that you are delaying your urge, and over time your urges may fade.
- **Find ways to relax and recharge:** Experiencing OCD can be stressful, overwhelming, and tiring at times. It is important that as you take steps to manage your OCD, you also take care of yourself! Finding the time to do things you enjoy such as watching your favorite TV show, going for a walk, practicing a hobby, getting active, or being creative, can help boost your mood and manage the stress that can come with OCD.
- **Practicing coping strategies to manage anxiety:** OCD is rooted in anxiety and adding tools to your toolbox to manage anxiety can be helpful to manage the physical and emotional distress that OCD causes.
 - Deep breathing techniques: breathing in through your nose for 4 seconds, holding it for 4 seconds, breathing out for 4 seconds, and resting for 4 seconds.
 - Grounding techniques: Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.
 - Journaling: Write about worries, thoughts, fears, emotions, and experiences.
 - Challenge anxious thoughts: When having worries about obsessions or compulsions, challenge your worries by asking yourself, 'Why would that worry not come true?'
 - If you are worried about failing your math test if you do not touch your bedroom doorknob three times, be the detective against your anxious thoughts and ask yourself, "Why would that worry not come true?" Find all the evidence against your anxious thoughts.
- **It is okay to ask for help:** One of the best approaches to managing OCD is through exposure therapy. Exposure therapy is completed with the help of a professional and consists of exposing an individual to a triggering event, object, etc. in a controlled way in order to practice improving comfort with the trigger and practicing managing the emotions and reactions that result from the trigger. If you are feeling as if your OCD is hard to manage or that your symptoms are getting in the way of your day or changing your lifestyle, it is okay to ask for help. Talk to your parents, school counselor, or a trusted adult that can help you get connected with a professional that can help you learn strategies to manage OCD. ***It is important that exposure therapy is guided by a professional and not practiced without proper guidance. ***



Resources:

Recommended Reading

- “You Do That Too? Adolescents and OCD” by Jose Arturo and Rena Benson
- “Being Me with OCD: How I Learned to Obsess Less and Live My Life” by Alison Dotson
- “Repetitive Rhonda” by Jan Evans MA
- “What to do When Your Brain Gets Stuck: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming OCD” by Dawn Huebner, PhD
- “Mr. Worry: A Story About OCD” by Holly L. Niner

References:

Adapted from:

Psych Central (2022)

Teens Health (2021)