

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. 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 partaking in 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 we 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

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 Support Your Child

- **Detect warning signs early on:** Noticing changes in your child's behavior and increased stress and anxiety can be important to understanding what your child is experiencing and also supporting them through their distress.
 - Common warning signs include: significant changes in routine, difficulty sleeping, rigidity, an increase in severity of emotional responses, need for reassurance, questioning oneself or having concerns, repetitive behaviors, etc.
- **Understand that your child is not being oppositional:** It can often feel as if your child is being oppositional or not following instructions when in reality, they are reacting to cycles of obsessions and compulsions.
 - To help you understand, think of something that terrifies you, for example, being stuck in an elevator, being on top of a skyscraper, or diving with sharks. In these situations, your body and mind would react out of anxiety and fear, and you would likely have a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. Obsessions can evoke a great amount of distress and it is the obsession that you and your child are battling against, not one another.
- **Provide support:** Supporting your child through OCD cycles and any distress that comes with those cycles is important especially as OCD is a disorder that can impact a family as a whole.
 - Provide opportunities for open lines of communication for your child to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences.
 - Provide empathy to your child while they are experiencing the stress and anxiety that comes with these experiences. Make sure your child feels heard, understood, and supported.
 - Remind yourself and your child that making progress is a process and to be patient while working towards adding tools to your toolbox to manage OCD.

- Recognize and celebrate progress! Acknowledging and appreciating any progress, no matter the size, is a helpful way to encourage and support your child.
- **Avoid accommodating:** Your child may ask you to help them or complete tasks for them in order to avoid the distress that comes from their obsessions. Although you want to support your child, accommodating for their OCD only gives the OCD more power.
 - Although accommodating your child may make things easier for you and your child in the moment, the accommodations will further reinforce the obsession and compulsion cycle.
 - Minimizing change, keeping routines “normal”, and preparing for transitions can be helpful ways to support the patient without reinforcing the cycle of OCD.
- **Help teach your child coping strategies to manage anxiety:** OCD is rooted in anxiety and adding tools to your child’s 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, thought, fears, emotions, and experiences.
- **Ask your child to draw their OCD:** OCD can often feel like a bully or monster that is wreaking havoc on your child’s brain. Drawing what this bully or monster looks like can help your child express themselves and helps them work through their fears and emotions by putting a face and image to their OCD.
- **Talk to a professional:** One of the best approaches to managing OCD is through exposure therapy which consists of exposing an individual to 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. **It is important that exposure therapy is guided by a professional and not practiced without proper guidance.**



The OCD Bully



Resources:

Recommended Reading

For Parents:

- “The ABC's of OCD!” by Kathleen Dunn
- “The Family Guide to Getting Over OCD: Reclaim Your Life and Help Your Loved One” by Jonathan S. Abramowitz, PhD
- “Freeing your Child from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder” by Tamar E Chansky, PhD
- “Helping Your Child With OCD” by Lee Fitzgibbons, PhD and Cherry Pedrick, R.N.

For Children:

- “Ten Turtles on Tuesday: A Story for Children About Obsessive Compulsive Disorder” by Ellen Flanagan Burns
- “The ABC's of OCD!” by Kathleen Dunn
- “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
- “The OCD Workbook for Kids” by Anthony Puliafico, Ph.D. & Joanna Robin, Ph.D.
- “Mr. Worry: A Story About OCD” by Holly L. Niner

For Adolescents:

- “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
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References:

Adapted from:

International OCD Foundation (n.d.)

Child Mind Institute (2023)

OCD and Anxiety Treatment Center (n.d.)

They Are The Future (TAFT) (n.d.)