

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

About OCD

An obsession is a repeated unwanted thought, idea or urge that take the place of your everyday thoughts for example worrying that you haven't turned off the oven. They can be frightening and make you feel anxious. You may worry that you or others are going to be harmed.

A compulsion is a repetitive activity that you feel you have to do even though you may know the behaviour does not make sense for example repeatedly checking a door to make sure it is locked.

Everyone will have worrying thoughts occasionally, for example leaving the oven on, but these thoughts don't cause any further problems or interfere with daily life. With OCD you will have repetitive worrying thoughts that can prevent you from thinking about anything else i.e. obsession. To try to lose these thoughts, you will feel compelled to carry out the repetitive activities i.e. compulsion. These prevent you from living life the way you want to.

It is thought that 1 to 2 per cent of the population have OCD severely enough to affect their normal life and it can affect people of all ages and from all backgrounds.

Symptoms of OCD

Although everyone will have their own experiences, there are some common themes of obsessions and compulsions.

Common obsessions

- Fear of contamination e.g. dirt and germs
- Fear of doing harm to yourself or others
- Fear of having a serious illness without having any symptoms
- Worrying about throwing away useless or worn out items

Common compulsions

- Excessive hand washing
- Checking something again and again e.g. checking a door is locked
- Saying something over and over or counting in your mind

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- Focusing on a number e.g. having to do everything 3 times, buy everything in 3's

The compulsion may be linked to the obsession but this is not always the case. The behaviour taken will help to push away the obsessive thought but this may become less effective and lead to an increasing amount of time each day spent on these activities.

Causes of OCD

It is not fully understood why OCD develops, but the following considerations may help to understand your own situation.

You may find your OCD is triggered or made worse by a stressful event such as bereavement, new job or birth of a baby. If you had a painful childhood experience or trauma you may learn to use OCD to cope with anxiety. It could also be because your parent showed signs of OCD. Research is also showing that the level of certain brain chemicals may indicate the severity of OCD symptoms.

Treatment for OCD

If you think you may have OCD and this is affecting your day to day life, it is recommended that you see your GP. Your GP can take into account your symptoms and previous health history to recommend the best treatment for you.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) – you may be referred to a counsellor for CBT which aims to identify the connection between thoughts and actions and help you to manage them. It will help you to confront the triggers for OCD and to resist the urge to carry out the compulsive behaviour that goes with it.

Medication – your GP may recommend medication to help with OCD or combine medication with CBT.

Self help

You may find that talking to other people who have similar symptoms helps you to understand your own situation. You could contact your local MIND association or OCD Action – details at the end of this help sheet.

There are CD's, DVD's and books that may be helpful and it is worth considering learning relaxation techniques to help you to deal with anxiety better.

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Useful contacts

OCD Action – information and support including support groups.

www.ocdaction.org.uk Tel: 0845 390 6232

OCD-UK – local support group information and 4 step programme for self help

www.ocduk.org Tel: 0845 120 3778

NHS choices – section on Obsessive compulsive disorder under the health A to Z

www.nhs.uk

MIND – local support groups and leaflets on OCD

www.mind.org.uk Tel: 0300 123 3393

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