

WHAT IS.....

OCD

What is OCD?

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is when a person has uncontrollable, reoccurring thoughts (obsessions) and/or behaviours (compulsions) that he or she feels the urge to repeat over and over. These obsessions and compulsions interfere with daily activities and cause significant distress because they can disrupt daily routines and social, school or work functioning.

What causes OCD?

There is no one reason as to what causes OCD and every person with OCD will have a different combination of factors that contribute to their experience. Some people have a strong family history of anxiety which can contribute. Being exposed to behaviours such as being fearful of illness or uncertainty, can also result in learnt responses. But generally, it is believed that OCD is formed as a coping strategy to feel more in control or to control uncertainty.

Symptoms

Although only 3% of the population has diagnosable OCD, most people experience some of the symptoms of OCD to a lesser degree. Research has shown that more than 90 per cent of people without OCD admit to experiencing intrusive or upsetting thoughts.

But someone with OCD usually experiences both obsessions and compulsions. But it's also possible to have only obsession symptoms or only compulsion symptoms.

Obsession Symptoms

OCD obsessions are repeated, persistent and unwanted thoughts, urges or images that are intrusive and cause distress or anxiety. You might try to ignore them or get rid of them by performing a compulsive behaviour or ritual. These obsessions typically intrude when you're trying to think of or do other things.

Obsessions often have themes to them, such as:

- Fear of contamination or dirt
- Doubting and having difficulty tolerating uncertainty
- Needing things orderly and symmetrical
- Aggressive or horrific thoughts about losing control and harming yourself or others
- Unwanted thoughts, including aggression, or sexual or religious subjects

Examples of obsession signs and symptoms include:

- Fear of being contaminated by touching objects others have touched
- Doubts that you've locked the door or turned off the stove
- Intense stress when objects aren't orderly or facing a certain way
- Images of driving your car into a crowd of people
- Thoughts about shouting obscenities or acting inappropriately in public
- Unpleasant sexual images
- Avoidance of situations that can trigger obsessions, such as shaking hands

Compulsion Symptoms

OCD compulsions are repetitive behaviours that you feel driven to perform. These repetitive behaviours or mental acts are meant to reduce anxiety related to your obsessions or prevent something bad from happening. However, engaging in the compulsions brings no pleasure and may offer only a temporary relief from anxiety.

You may make up rules or rituals to follow that help control your anxiety when you're having obsessive thoughts. These compulsions are excessive and often not realistically related to the problem they're intended to fix.

Common compulsive behaviours in OCD include:

- Excessive double-checking of things, such as locks, appliances, and switches
- Repeatedly checking in on loved ones to make sure they're safe
- Counting, tapping, repeating certain words, or doing other senseless things to reduce anxiety
- Spending a lot of time washing or cleaning
- Ordering or arranging things "just so"
- Praying excessively or engaging in rituals triggered by religious fear
- Accumulating "junk" such as old newspapers or empty food containers

As with obsessions, compulsions typically have themes, such as:

- Washing and cleaning
- Checking
- Counting
- Orderliness
- Following a strict routine
- Demanding reassurance

Examples of compulsion signs and symptoms include:

- Hand-washing until your skin becomes raw
- Checking doors repeatedly to make sure they're locked
- Checking the stove repeatedly to make sure it's off
- Counting in certain patterns
- Silently repeating a prayer, word or phrase
- Arranging your canned goods to face the same way

