

## Obsessive – Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

To wipe down the door handles in each room of the house is something you may do routinely. However if you find yourself wiping the door handles constantly and worrying obsessively about germs each time someone comes into the room and it is interfering with your daily life you may well be suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

### What is obsessive –compulsive disorder (OCD)?

Obsessive- compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder characterised by uncontrollable, unwanted thoughts and repetitive, ritualised behaviours you feel compelled to perform.

If you have OCD, you probably recognise that your obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours are irrational – but even so, you feel unable to resist them and break free.

OCD causes the brain to get stuck on a particular thought or urge. For example, you may check the iron ten times to make sure it is turned off, wash your hands until they're scrubbed raw, or drive around for hours to make sure that the bump you heard while driving wasn't a person you ran over.

Most people with OCD fall into one of the following categories:

- **Washers** are afraid of contamination. They usually have cleaning or hand-washing compulsions.
- **Checkers** repeatedly check things (oven turned off, door locked, etc.) that they associate with harm or danger.
- **Doubters** are afraid that if everything isn't perfect or done just right something terrible will happen or they will be punished.
- **Counters** and arrangers are obsessed with order and symmetry. They may have superstitions about certain numbers, colours or arrangements.
- **Hoarders** fear that something bad will happen if they throw anything away. They compulsively hoard things that they don't need or use.

### Therapy as treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

The most effective treatment for OCD is often cognitive behavioural therapy. Antidepressants are sometime used in conjunction with therapy, although medication alone is rarely effective in relieving the symptoms of OCD.

### Four Steps for Conquering Symptoms of OCD

Psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz, author of *Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive Compulsive Behaviour* offers the following four steps for dealing with OCD:

- **Re-label** – Recognise that the intrusive obsessive thoughts and urges are the result of OCD. For example, train yourself to say, "I don't think or feel that my hands are dirty. I'm having an obsession that my hands are dirty." Or, "I don't feel that I have the need to wash my hands. I'm having a compulsive urge to perform the compulsion of washing my hands."
- **Re-attribute** – Realise that the intensity and intrusiveness of the thought or urge is caused by OCD: it is probably related to a biochemical imbalance in the brain. Tell yourself, "It's not me – it's my OCD," to remind you that OCD thoughts and urges are not meaningful, but are false messages from the brain.

- **Re-focus** – Work around the OCD thoughts by focusing your attention on something else, at least for a few minutes. Do another behaviour. Say to yourself, “I’m experiencing a symptom of OCD. I need to do another behaviour.”
- **Re-value** – Do not take the OCD thought at face value. It is not significant in itself. Tell yourself, “That’s just my stupid obsession. It has no meaning. That’s just my brain. There’s no need to pay attention to it. “Remember: You can’t make the thought go away, but neither do you need to pay attention to it. You can learn to go on to the next behaviour.

Source: *Westwood Institute for Anxiety Disorders*

### **Tips for helping a work colleague, friend or family member with OCD**

The way you react to a persons OCD symptoms can have a big impact.

- **Negative comments or criticism** can make OCD worse, while a calm, supportive environment can help improve the outcome of treatment. Focus on the sufferer’s positive qualities and avoid making personal criticisms.
- **Don’t scold** someone with OCD or tell the person to stop performing rituals. They can’t comply, and the pressure to stop will only make the behaviours worse. Remember, the OCD behaviours are symptoms, not character flaws.
- **Be as kind and patient as possible.** Each sufferer needs to overcome problems at their own pace. Praise any successful attempt to resist OCD, and focus attention on positive elements in the person’s life.
- **Do not play along with OCD rituals.** Helping the sufferer with rituals will only reinforce the behaviour. Support the person, not the rituals.
- **Create a pact to not allow OCD to take over family life.** Sit down as a family and decide how you will work together to tackle your loved one’s OCD symptoms. Try to keep family life as normal as possible and the home a low stress environment.
- **Communicate positively, directly and clearly.** Communication is important so you can find a balance between standing up to the OCD and not further distressing the sufferer.
- **Find the humour.** Seeing the humour and absurdity in some OCD symptoms can help the sufferer become more detached from the disorder. Of course, a situation is only humorous if the sufferer finds it funny too.

Source: Lawrence Robinson, Melinda Smith, M.A., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.