

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

We all, at times, go back and check to make sure we have unplugged the iron or locked the doors. In obsessive-compulsive disorder, obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors become so extreme that they interfere with our capacity to enjoy daily life. You don't want the thoughts or behaviors, but, no matter what you do your mind just won't stop obsessing.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder characterized by uncontrollable thoughts and repetitive behaviors that you feel compelled to perform. You are unable to stop the thoughts or resist the behavior. Your brain is "stuck" on a particular thought or urge. You may check the doors 20 times to make sure they are locked. You can wash your hands until they are raw or drive around for hours making sure that the bump you felt in the road wasn't someone you just ran over.

Obsessions are involuntary, uncontrollable thoughts, images, or impulses that "run" through your mind incessantly. You may think that the thoughts don't make sense but you can't stop them. Unfortunately, they are often disturbing.

Compulsions are behaviors or rituals that you are compelled to act out over and over. Usually the compulsions are performed in an attempt to make the obsessions stop. The relief doesn't last. Often, the obsessive thoughts return with more strength than before. The compulsive behaviors, instead of relieving anxiety, end up causing more anxiety because the behaviors become more demanding, less controllable, and increasingly time-consuming.

We can all have obsessive-compulsive traits. In fact, many of us can actually enjoy some of our OCD traits. However, in obsessive-compulsive *disorder*, the traits have reached the point where they are debilitating.

Most people with obsessive-compulsive disorder have both obsessions and compulsions. Some people have one without the other. The symptoms may increase or decrease over time but generally increase during stressful times.

Some common obsessive thoughts include:

- Fear of getting sick or being contaminated by germs
- Fear of causing harm
- Intrusive sexually explicit or violent thoughts
- Excessive focus on religion or morality
- Fear of losing things or of not having something when you might need it.
- Lining up things – excessive organizing that often includes needs for symmetry
- Superstitions

Some common compulsive behaviors include:

- Double checking (locks, electrical appliances, switches, etc.)
- Checking incessantly on the safety of another
- Counting, tapping, repeating words, or doing other senseless things to decrease anxiety
- Washing or cleaning
- Praying excessively or engaging excessively in religious rituals
- Accumulating "stuff"

Most people with obsessive-compulsive disorder fall into one of the following categories:

Checkers repeated check things that could cause danger and leave them vulnerable

Washers are generally afraid of contamination- either getting or causing contamination. They wash and clean excessively. The focus can be on their body/hands or on the home.

Doubters and sinners are afraid that if they aren't perfect something terrible will happen or they will be punished in some way – either now or later.

Counters and arrangers are obsessed with order and/or symmetry. They often have superstitions about certain colors or numbers.

Hoarders fear that they may not have an item when they need it or that something bad will happen if they “waste” something by throwing it away. They can also be “bargain shoppers”, purchasing things that they will never need just because they are priced well. “Stuff” accumulates.

Medication can be helpful; however, medication alone is rarely successful in the treatment of Obsessive-compulsive disorder. Psychotherapy usually involves two components of treatment: 1. Cognitive Training and 2. Exposure and response-prevention therapy. Both treatment modalities can actually retrain the brain, permanently reducing the recurrence of symptoms.