

Obsessive- compulsive disorder (OCD)



What is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition that affects many people of all ages and from all walks of life.

Obsessions are thoughts, images, fears or feelings which the person knows are wrong but cannot stop or get rid of. They can be intrusive and may be triggered by some event, image or situation or they may be constant throughout the day, causing distress and functional disruption.

Compulsions are repetitive behaviours or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform. They are meant to reduce anxiety related to their obsessions or to prevent something bad from happening. However, engaging in the compulsion brings no pleasure and may offer only temporary relief from anxiety.

Although OCD can start at any age, it tends to occur between the ages of 8 and 12, or between the late teenage years and early adulthood.

Obsessive-compulsive symptoms may also occur with other mental health conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder, phobias, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), eating disorders or Tourette's syndrome.

Common signs and symptoms of OCD

People with OCD can have:

- a cycle of repetitive thoughts (obsessions) and actions or rituals (compulsions) that disrupts their daily life and affects their mental well-being
- obsessive thoughts or feelings that are very hard to stop and are often of an upsetting nature (e.g. with aggressive, obscene or sexual content)
- compulsions, which are actions repeated over and over again such as counting, checking, touching or washing to try to reduce anxiety or stress around the obsessive thought or feeling.

The most common themes of obsessions are:

- fear of contamination by germs or dirt, e.g. from shaking hands with someone or from touching objects that others have touched
- unwanted or taboo thoughts about sexual or religious subjects
- needing things to be orderly and symmetrical
- aggressive or disturbing thoughts about losing control and harming oneself or others: for example, thoughts about shouting obscenities in public.

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

- cleaning and washing e.g. handwashing repetitively or for prolonged periods
- checking e.g. checking doors repeatedly to make sure that they're locked or checking the stove repeatedly to make sure that it's off
- repeating e.g. silently repeating a prayer, word or phrase
- counting e.g. counting certain patterns
- orderliness e.g. arranging things to face the same way
- following a strict routine
- demanding reassurance.

What causes OCD?

The causes of OCD are not fully understood.

However, there are certain factors and situations that may contribute to the disorder:

- **Genetics.** OCD may have a genetic component. Having parents or other family members with the disorder can increase your risk of developing OCD.
- **Learning.** Obsessive fears and compulsive behaviours can be learned from watching family members or from personal experiences over time.
- **Stressful life events.** Traumatic or stressful events, especially during childhood, can increase the risk of OCD.
- **Other mental health disorders.** OCD may be related to other mental health disorders, such as anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse or tic disorders.

When to seek help for OCD

- Having thoughts and feelings that are difficult to cope with or that also have an impact on your day-to-day life, including relationships, work, etc.
- Having repetitive thoughts and feelings that are distressing or disturbing.
- Finding it hard to be happy or to enjoy your life because of these repetitive thoughts or actions.
- Having concerns about your symptoms and wanting to find support or treatment.

Treating OCD

OCD is often hard to talk about, and you may be embarrassed to discuss it with your family or friends. But help is available, and you do not need to feel alone. Appropriate treatment can improve the quality of life and daily functioning of people with OCD.

Medications or psychotherapy, or both, can be used to treat people with OCD. A mental health professional can help you to choose the best form of treatment to suit your symptoms and your situation.

Medication

If your OCD symptoms are severe, medications are available. A class of antidepressant medications known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) can be effective in the treatment of OCD. Other medications may be prescribed if the symptoms do not improve with SSRIs or you are also experiencing other mental disorders, such as anxiety or depression.

Psychological treatment and support

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT can help you learn to notice cues or triggers and respond to them in ways that help to control your obsessions and compulsions. CBT focuses on challenging and changing cognitive distortions (such as thoughts, beliefs and attitudes) and the behaviours associated with them and developing personal coping strategies.

Exposure and response prevention. During exposure and response prevention, the therapist provides education about OCD and identifies the patient's unique triggers and the compulsions they provoke. With the therapist's guidance, the patient is systematically exposed to objects, situations, mental images or other stimuli that trigger obsessions or is exposed directly to the obsessions themselves with "response prevention" – i.e. learning not to respond to the obsessions with the usual compulsive behaviours. With exposure to increasingly uncomfortable stimuli, patients acquire the ability to tolerate the distress they generate without having to resort to the rituals that perpetuate obsessive-compulsive patterns.

Relaxation

It may be easier to manage your OCD symptoms with daily stress reduction and relaxation techniques, in combination with therapy. Meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, and relieve visualization and mindfulness offer a way to relax and relieve the stress and anxiety usually felt by OCD sufferers.

Social and community support

Joining a support group in your area for people with OCD can be a great way to find others who know exactly how you feel and what you are going through. The sense of community that a support group offers can also be a good complement to individual therapy.

How can you help yourself if you are diagnosed with OCD?

OCD can make a person feel helpless but support groups are numerous, both online and in health care settings, and are a good way to share feelings and experiences with other people who also suffer from OCD.

Getting a proper diagnosis and a mutually agreed upon treatment plan with a mental health care professional can help you to make sense of your condition. Sticking to a treatment plan can be challenging, but it will help ease your distress. If

you are taking medication and are experiencing any side-effects, contact your doctor. Never stop the medication or change the dosage by yourself.

Keeping to a good diet, getting proper sleep, taking exercise and maintaining an overall healthy lifestyle, while being aware of your behaviours, can help in coping with OCD. Basic relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, visualization, mindfulness and massage can help ease the stress, tension and anxiety caused by OCD.

How can you help a friend or family member who has OCD?

People who have OCD can be frustrated by their symptoms and feel that others won't understand what they're going through. If you think a family member or friend may have OCD, try to open up a conversation with them. Do not judge or offer advice; just listen to how they're feeling and experiencing.

Guide them to seek professional help as early as possible because symptoms of OCD can often lead to depression or increased anxiety. If they're resistant, show them online resources on OCD from a trusted medical source that may help them to understand their symptoms and behaviours better.

Leading a healthy lifestyle, finding a support group or mental health professional or learning new ways to cope with the stress that accompanies OCD can make living with the disorder a lot easier.

Resources

[Stress: questions and answers](#)

[Self-Help Plus \(SH+\)](#)

[Mental health and psychosocial support](#)

[Healthy diet](#)

[Dealing with stress](#)

[Doing what matters in times of stress](#)

[Yoga for stress relief](#)

[Mental health professionals by country](#)

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the Regional Office's website at: <https://www.emro.who.int/mnh/publications/mental-health-disorders.html>.