What is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)?

OCD is a serious anxiety problem where you can get troubled by particular sorts of repetitive and upsetting thoughts (obsessions) and behaviours (compulsions).

An obsession is a thought, image or urge that keeps coming into a person’s mind even though they may not want it to. Horrible thoughts can come into their minds such as thinking something awful might happen to their family. An obsession can be annoying, unpleasant or distressing and they may want it to go away but be unable to stop it from happening. An example of an obsession is the thought that your hands are dirty even though they are not. Another one is a doubt that you haven’t done something like lock the door or turned the oven off. Different people have different obsessions. Here are some examples:

- worrying about illness
- fears about dirt and spreading disease
- worrying about harm happening to you or someone else
- fearing that something ‘bad’ may happen
- worrying about things being tidy.

Compulsions are behaviours people feel they need to do, even though they may not want to. They might even try to stop doing them, but this might not be possible.

Often, a compulsion means doing something again and again, as a ‘ritual’. By doing the compulsion a person will feel that they can prevent or reduce their anxiety about what they fear may happen if they don’t do it. For example, turning the light on and off 20 times because they worry something bad may happen if they don’t.

Different people have different compulsions. Some examples include:

- washing rituals
- checking rituals
- thinking certain thoughts
- touching rituals
- ordering/arranging things or lining things up
- counting rituals.

Individuals who have these problems often try to avoid any situation that might set off obsessive thoughts (e.g. not using hands to open doors). OCD can vary in severity from person to person but it is very distressing for the person experiencing it especially when the obsessions and compulsions take up a lot of time and interfere with daily life.
Who does OCD affect?

OCD can affect people of all ages, and often starts in childhood.

How Many People does OCD affect?

Estimates put the number of adults experiencing OCD at about 1.2%1. That's about 12 people in a 1000. For young people (under 16) the estimate is about 2 – 3%. If your school had a 1000 pupils that could mean about 25 pupils had OCD.

What causes OCD?

No-one is really sure about the cause of OCD. It may involve a chemical imbalance in the brain or come about as a result of stress or an emotionally traumatic experience. It is likely to be a combination of factors and the causes may be different for different people.

Help for OCD?

The good news is that for the majority of people OCD can be effectively controlled and treated with medication and therapy such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

More information about OCD


OCD Action have a site called OCD at school for young people, teachers and parents. [http://school.ocdaction.org.uk/](http://school.ocdaction.org.uk/)

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1 Source OCD-UK website August 2011.
Case study: John, 18

"It started without me really noticing it. I got anxious about someone in my family dying – so I began to tap three times, when I got worried, for good luck and that would calm me down. Then I had to do it before I could go to sleep at night – not once but 3 x 3.

When I watched the programme on TV about those germs in hospital it began to get worse. I couldn’t tell my Mum or Dad about it because it sounded so silly. I had to wash my hands all the time because I thought I would pass on an infection and someone would die. It was mainly at home, but then I began to worry that I would catch something at school.

I made my Mum wash my school uniform every day. She tried to say no, but I would get so worked up that she would give in. It came to a head when I couldn’t get to school on time because I was spending hours in the bathroom in the morning. I had to wash my hair three times as well as going through washing in a set order. If I was interrupted because someone needed the bathroom, I had to start again.

Mum got me some help. I didn’t want to be seen as some psycho person, but Dr Roberts was really nice and understood why I was so worked up about everything. That was when I was 14. Now I am 18. It was hard work doing the therapy. It is called CBT. You have to try and work out why you are so anxious and try and control it. Now I am at College and doing a course that I like. I still do some counting, but I can keep it under control."

Nigel, 15

I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder when I was eleven. However, I never got cognitive behaviour therapy till recently. Now I am fifteen. I feel like it gets in the way of everything. I have a strict routine from morning to night. I have no control over it. When I get up in the morning, I have to turn my light on and off five times before I can leave my bedroom for the bathroom. My morning routine to get ready from how many times I brush my teeth to how many times I comb my hair is very structured. The clothes in my cupboard are folded and hung a certain way. A good, practical way but not just shoved and slumped about like in my younger brother’s room.

After I eat my breakfast, I must wash my hands before I touch my book bag. I get stuck in the door sometimes, on my way to school. Not physically stuck, but I can’t go anywhere till I check for my front door key, again five times. On the way to school I fight the urge to open my backpack to check that my key is still in there.

It used to be worse, than this. I have CBT training and I am working on me controlling my OCD and not the other way around. I take medication to help. Some days are better than others. Near exam time my stress gets much worse and I ‘tick’, constantly during an exam. This means I get locked in a behaviour like wiping my hand across my forehead repeatedly. I take my exams in the teacher work area of the library. It is nice and quiet back there and if I start to tick the special needs teacher will let me know.

During school, I have trouble leaving my locker because I need to check it over and over to make sure that my books are where they are supposed to be. As I walk to class I look down. I am afraid if I let my feet touch a certain part of the pattern in the floor tiles, something very bad will happen. It never does. Sometimes, secretly, I am afraid that if my mum doesn’t hug me six times every day something bad will happen to her. It never has, but still I worry.

My evening routine is just as demanding as my morning routine. I am hoping to get better. I have started CBT and medication and I hope that helps.