Understanding Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

We think all the time. On average, an individual can process 70,000 thoughts a day. Sometimes, especially when we are feeling under pressure, thoughts become disturbing and intrusive.

Alongside the thoughts, we find ourselves checking and re-checking whether we have done certain things such as locking doors or switching off lights, which we normally do automatically with very little conscious thought. This can be a normal response to stress and when life calms down again the thoughts and rituals disappear. However, this is not the case for those with OCD.

OCD is a serious, anxiety disorder where the individual experiences frequent intrusive and unwelcome thoughts (obsessions), often followed by repetitive actions, impulses or urges (compulsions.) The nature of the thoughts is often disturbing and distressing and those with OCD symptoms are reluctant to talk about them out of embarrassment, guilt or even shame.

Although the person knows their thoughts are irrational, they feel that the only way to prevent harm to themselves, others and especially loved ones, is to perform specific actions or rituals. They often feel very anxious and carry a heavy burden of responsibility for their thoughts which they fear will lead to harmful or destructive acts or events. Associated with the obsessions and compulsions are other forms of behaviour, such as avoidance and safety-seeking actions.

A person with OCD may avoid certain situations or adopt strategies to stop the intrusive thought being enacted, for example, a person who fears contamination with dirt will make sure they never touch a door handle or sit on a toilet seat.

A person may help themselves to feel OK and safe by carrying out rituals which neutralise the negative aspects of their thoughts. For example, a person whose obsessions are of a religious nature may devote extra time to prayer after having a blasphemous thought.

Symptoms fall into four broad categories:

1. Checking - Worrying you haven't turned off the oven even though you have checked repeatedly
2. Contamination - Thinking you are contaminated by dirt and germs requiring repeated washing and cleaning
3. Hoarding - Stockpiling possessions and being unable to throw things away even though they appear to be useless or of limited value Intrusive thoughts
4. Being disturbed by destructive or disgusting images which may involve harm to yourself or another person, or thoughts of a blasphemous or sexual nature

What can I do if I think I have OCD?

If you have intrusive thoughts and carry out compulsive actions which are beginning to take up an excessive amount of time (over an hour a day) and are causing you distress, stopping you functioning normally contact:
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- your GP who will discuss with you what further support you may need.
- the University Counselling and Wellbeing Service on 0118 378 4216 or email counselling@reading.ac.uk
- in addition, talk to a trusted friend or family member for support; contact your tutor or supervisor so they know it is affecting your ability to study with help, symptoms of OCD can greatly reduce or completely disappear.

What causes OCD?

There is no definitive cause. Some scientists point to a chemical imbalance in the brain whilst others feel it is a combination of biological, psychological and social factors. A genetic link is suggested where OCD appears to run in families. If you are able to think about what may have caused or contributed to your OCD it can help you regard yourself with greater kindness and understanding and it can reduce the stigma associated with the condition.

Recognised forms of treatment:

Therapy

A counsellor can provide a safe, confidential environment where you can begin to explore the nature and extent of your obsessions and compulsions, learn more about what triggers them and what meaning you attribute to them so you can begin to take control of your life, rather than being controlled by your symptoms.

Medication

Sometimes medication can be helpful alongside therapy to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Self-help

Self-help books like Brain Lock by Jeffrey Schwartz can be a useful start. His theory of how to overcome OCD is based on the premise that it is caused by an imbalance in the brain and that by changing thought patterns and responses to the symptoms of OCD, the brain chemistry can be altered and symptoms alleviated. This book, like many self-help books on OCD, includes techniques used in CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.) This approach helps you explore alternative ways of thinking (cognition) and challenges beliefs through specific exercises (behaviour).

How can I begin to help myself?

- Name your obsessive thoughts as thoughts. They do not define who you are nor have the power to dictate what you do or how you live your life. They may have a tyrannical hold on your life, but the reality is they are merely thoughts. Thoughts are not the same as actions. Thinking a ‘bad’ thought does not make you a ‘bad’ person.
- Tell yourself that the thoughts and rituals are symptoms of an anxiety condition called OCD and are ‘false messages’ about who you are.
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- Begin to develop more constructive thought processes which don't allow the obsessions and rituals to be centre stage. Imagine you are trying to read a book and you become aware of road works going on outside. You can either focus on the drilling to the extent it stops you reading, or choose to put the noise to one side and continue your reading. You determine what you do and are not dictated to by road works! It is the same with your obsessions and compulsions.
- Quieten the mind by learning to switch off through mindfulness meditation. This is a technique based on Buddhist principles of being in the present moment, and is widely used in non-religious contexts to help people with anxiety and depression. It is essentially sitting in a quiet place and concentrating on breathing whilst gently putting aside any thoughts which float into the mind in order to achieve a state of stillness and peace. (See Quiet the Mind by Matthew Johnstone.)

Useful contacts, sources of help and information

- OCD UK: www.ocduk.org.uk
- OCD Action: www.ocdaction.org.uk
- Mind: Infoline 0300 123 3393/ www.mind.org.uk
- Brain Lock: Free Yourself from Obsessive, Compulsive Behavior, Jeffrey Schwartz MD, (1996 USA Harper Collins) (A short DVD explaining the Four Steps approach outlined in this book can be viewed on the OCD UK website.)
- Counselling and Wellbeing: Email: counselling@reading.ac.uk or telephone: 0118 378 4216