

OCD: Obsessions, Compulsions & the Relief Cycle

A plain-language introduction to intrusive thoughts and compulsive attempts to neutralize uncertainty.

What OCD can involve

Obsessive-compulsive disorder can involve unwanted intrusive thoughts, images, urges, or doubts followed by repetitive behaviors or mental rituals intended to reduce distress or prevent a feared outcome. Intrusive thoughts do not define a person's values or intentions.

The cycle

- An intrusive thought or doubt appears.
- The mind demands certainty or interprets the thought as meaningful.
- A compulsion, reassurance, checking behavior, avoidance, or mental ritual is used.
- Anxiety drops temporarily, which teaches the brain to repeat the ritual next time.

Treatment direction

- Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), a specialized form of CBT, has strong evidence for OCD.
- ERP involves planned contact with triggers while reducing compulsive responses, usually in a gradual and collaborative way.
- Trying to prove that every intrusive thought is false can become another reassurance ritual.

Important distinction

OCD is not simply liking order or being particular. Diagnosis and treatment planning should be completed by a qualified clinician.

Try this reflection

What does the compulsion promise: certainty, safety, moral reassurance, or relief? How long does that relief usually last?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.