

Obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD) usually have two aspects. First, obsessive thoughts which intrude repeatedly into the mind against the will, despite all attempts to banish them. These thoughts may concern contaminating oneself or others, harming others, going against a social taboo, or some other harm occurring. Secondly, these thoughts are often accompanied by 'compulsions' or 'rituals' which are acts that are carried out time and again, to reduce anxiety, although the person may know that they are silly and try to resist them. These acts may include frequent hand washing, checking, hoarding or carrying out special rituals.

These types of difficulty tend to occur in people who have always had meticulous and perfectionist personalities, although they can occur in anybody. Such tendencies can get worse or flare up during times of personal stress or change.

The symptoms are extremely distressing and can end up dominating a person's life. Avoidance of certain situations or objects that trigger anxiety is common. While this seems a reasonable short-term strategy it actually adds to the long-term problem. Anxiety about the symptoms is likely to make the symptoms worse. Intrusive thoughts about harming others can at times be bizarre and frightening but the risk of translating the thoughts into action is in fact almost nonexistent.

■ Treatment of OCD

- ① Identify and talk about all of your symptoms no matter how embarrassing they are.
- ② It is helpful to carefully monitor and identify when and how often these thoughts and behaviours occur. Keep a diary sheet.
- ③ Learn new techniques for controlling anxiety symptoms such as relaxation, distraction and positive self-talk.
- ④ As with any phobia, you will need to expose yourself gradually to the situation that you fear. For example, if you have a fear of contamination, touch dirty objects.

- ⑤ Once you have deliberately made yourself anxious by confronting the fear, you need to manage your anxiety and resist the compulsive behaviour. This third phase is called 'response prevention' and may mean resisting handwashing or checking activities.
- ⑥ Most OCD sufferers try to avoid thinking about their intrusive thoughts. Often the more you try to push these thoughts out the more they bounce back into consciousness. Try deliberately thinking about the thought for 10 minutes a day.
- ⑦ Do not confuse a thought with an action. 'A thoughtie is not a naughty'.
- ⑧ Set limits on your rituals and compulsions. Cut down the frequency.
- ⑨ Put a rubber band around your wrist and every time you think of the unwanted thought tweak yourself.
- ⑩ Identify the stresses in your life that are presently exacerbating your symptoms. Change your lifestyle.
- ⑪ Very often the whole family may be involved in the maintenance of these rituals and may be asked to give reassurance, which temporarily dampens down your anxiety. They have to learn not to give this reassurance and say something neutral: 'You know they said at the hospital that I was not to answer those questions'.
- ⑫ Explore the significance of the concept of responsibility in your life and how it fits in with your symptoms. Do you feel overly responsible?
- ⑬ If symptoms are severe, medication that has a specific effect on the serotonin levels in your brain can be helpful.

Three Rules to Remember

Repeat your fears until bored to tears.
When fears are faced they get erased.
I must refrain to untrain my brain.