



Obsessive Compulsive Disorder



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What is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)?

OCD is characterized by thoughts, urges, or images that keep coming into a person's mind which produce distress. Although the person may recognize that these thoughts are meaningless or unreasonable, it is very difficult to ignore the thoughts. To relieve the distress, the person feels compelled to perform repetitive actions (e.g. repeated checking or hand washing) or mental acts (e.g. repeat a 'lucky number' in the head). Due to the huge amount of time spent on these repetitive thoughts and behaviours each day, OCD can seriously interfere with a person's life, thus creating extreme distress.

What are the causes of OCD?

Genetic Factor

First-degree relatives of people with OCD are more likely to suffer from OCD.

Biological Factor

Research suggested that OCD is related to low levels of serotonin, and abnormalities in the orbital-frontal cortex and the basal ganglia in the brain.

Psychological Factor

People who are anxiety-prone, perfectionistic, or prefer keeping things clean and tidy are more prone to develop OCD.

How do I know if I have OCD?

If you had the experience of going back to check whether you had locked the door of your home or car properly, or washing your hands a few more times than usual during influenza pandemic, this does not mean that you have OCD.

However, if you have 1 or more of the following obsessions or compulsions that you feel distressed about, and spend more than 1 hour per day on these thoughts and behaviours, which seriously affect your daily life (e.g. work, school, social life), you might have OCD. You should seek help from health care professionals.

1. Obsessions - Obsessions are thoughts, urges or images that persistently come into a person's mind (for instance, fear of contracting germs from other people, fear of acting on an impulse to harm others, fear of being responsible for accidents happening), thus causing anxiety and distress.
2. Compulsions - Compulsions are repetitive behaviours (e.g. washing hands, putting things in a certain order, checking) or mental acts (e.g. praying, calculating, repeating words or phrases) that the person feels driven to perform in response to an obsession. The behaviors are aimed at reducing distress or preventing a feared situation.

What are the Treatments for OCD?

Treatments for OCD include drug therapy and psychotherapy. Most individuals receive both treatment methods at the same time to achieve better treatment outcome.

Drug treatment

In most cases, Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) or tricyclic antidepressant (TCA) are prescribed. When necessary, tranquilizers may also be prescribed.

Psychotherapy

Cognitive-behavioural therapy is an effective treatment for OCD. It is designed to help individuals modify their irrational anxiety-provoking thoughts, and confront the feared objects or situations in a gradual manner (e.g. objects perceived to be highly contaminated). Through changing thoughts and experiences, one's anxiety and compulsions can be reduced. Initially, individuals will feel uneasy when facing feared objects or situations in therapy, but with repeated exposure anxiety will be reduced gradually.

Active participation in therapy from individuals with OCD and from their family members (e.g. by providing supervision and support) are essential for effective treatment.