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OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

What is obsessive-compulsive disorder?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) has two main parts: obsessions and compulsions.

Obsessions are unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly appear in someone's mind. These are uncomfortable thoughts to experience and can make a person feel anxious. Some examples include:

- A fear that something bad will happen if everything isn't 'right'. For example, if things are not clean, in order or symmetrical.
- Worrying you've already harmed someone by not being careful enough.
- Contamination (for example by dirt, germs or faeces). You might worry that you have been contaminated and that you – or other people – are spreading the contamination. You might worry that you have or might get a disease.
- Worrying you're going to harm someone because you will lose control.
- Mental contamination. You might experience feelings of dirtiness that are triggered by a person who has harmed you in some way. These feelings may also be triggered by your own thoughts, images or memories.
- Sexually intrusive thoughts or images. These could be related to children, family members or to sexually aggressive behaviour.

Compulsions are repetitive activities that someone does to reduce the anxiety caused by the obsession. It could be something like repeatedly checking a door is locked, repeating a specific phrase in your head or checking how your body feels. Compulsions can:

- be physical actions
- be mental rituals
- involve a number (for example, you might feel you have to complete a compulsion a specific number of times without interruption).

Although many people experience minor obsessions (such as worrying about whether the doors are locked or an appliance has been left switched on) and compulsions (such as avoiding the cracks in the pavement), these don't significantly interfere with daily life, or are short-lived.

Living with OCD

If someone experiences OCD, it's likely that the obsessions and compulsions will have a big impact on how they live their life, in a variety of ways:

- Disruption to your day-to-day life. Repeating compulsions can take up a lot of time, and certain situations that trigger OCD might be avoided – so someone does not feel able to go to work, see family and friends, eat out or even go outside. Obsessive thoughts can make it hard to concentrate and leave someone feeling exhausted.
- Impact on relationships. Someone may feel that they have to hide OCD from people or that anxieties and concerns about a relationship may make it too difficult to continue.

- Feeling ashamed or lonely of obsessive thoughts, or worrying that they can't be treated. By hiding this from others, it can make people feel isolated and lonely.
- Feeling anxious. Some obsessions and compulsions can make someone feel anxious and stressed. For example, some people feel that they have to carry out their compulsions so frequently that they have little control over them.

OCD and stigma

Lots of people have misconceptions about OCD. Some people think it just means someone has to have everything neat and tidy, or they have to wash hands frequently. They might even make jokes about it or describe themselves as a 'little bit OCD'.

This can be frustrating and upsetting, especially if someone who feels this way is a friend, colleague, family member or healthcare professional. It is important to remember that these misconceptions come from a lack of understanding and knowledge about the condition.