

STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

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Part 1 - What is OCD?

- How common is it?
- What causes it?
- What keeps it going?

Part 2 - What can I do to help myself?

- Face your fears
- Response prevention
- Challenge negative thinking
- Relaxation

“I worry about germs all the time. I get so tense and worked-up. I’m afraid that I’ll become contaminated by other people and get sick. I know it’s silly but I worry that I’ll infect my family. I feel really anxious if anyone else touches me. I can’t even cuddle my own kids. I always make sure that I carry a hankie around with me so that I don’t have to touch door handles or surfaces that might be covered in germs. That makes me feel much better.

If I touch something, I wash my hands over and over again to make sure they are clean. I use really hot water and the soap and hard scrubbing means my hands are red raw. It’s the same with the housework, I clean as soon as I wake up. Sometimes I have to get up in the middle of the night to make sure the bathroom is germ-free because it’s all I can think about. My family are really worried about me. I know my husband thinks I should just snap out of it. In some ways I realise that I’m being daft but I just don’t know how to stop.” **Alison, 37**

“I can’t get anything done, I’m always late for work. I’m worried that something will happen to the house when I’m gone. I never feel sure the water isn’t running. I check that all of the plugs are pulled out of the sockets and that I haven’t left the gas on. I shut and lock the door, then give it a wee push to check its locked, walk down the path, turn back, unlock and lock it again just to make sure. I’m driving myself round the bend because I know it’s locked! The thing is, if my flatmate is out after me its fine – then I’m not to blame if it goes wrong. I feel so anxious, it makes me sick to my stomach. I’d feel so guilty if something did happen to the house, I’d feel like it was my fault. I’m always imagining the worst” **Brian, 24**

“I just don’t feel right. I’m really afraid that I’ll do something to hurt my mum. These thoughts are always in my head. I can picture pushing her down the stairs or strangling her. I get so upset, I’m supposed to be looking after her. I feel like such a horrible person. I try to think ‘good’ thoughts to make me feel better such as ‘I know I love her’ and ‘I would never hurt anyone’.

I spend hours everyday going around her house hiding sharp objects and anything else that I think I could use to harm her. That makes me feel better for a while but the thoughts always come back. I feel like I’m fighting a constant battle in my head.” **Rhona, 52**

“I’m really worried I’ve got cancer. Any chance I get, I sit on the internet so that I’ll know what to look out for. I can’t stop thinking about what would happen if I didn’t catch it on time. My Gran died of cancer. No one knew anything about it until 2 weeks before she died. If I get a headache or an upset stomach I’m sure it’s a symptom. I go to the doctor too much. I knew he’s getting angry with me. He tells me I’m young and healthy but it doesn’t stop me thinking about it.

I keep asking for scans – how can he be sure I’m OK? I feel like everyone around me has cancer. If there’s a story on the news or in the papers I’ll know about it. My girlfriend tells me I’m alright and I need to relax but I don’t know why no one else is worried. I feel like it’s only a matter of time. I’m always on edge, ready for the worst. I get sweaty and I feel like my hearts going way too fast” **Andy, 19**

Part 1

What is OCD?

We all have habits. Some habits come from being worried or unsure. You might have to double-check the front door is locked when you leave the house. You might always cross your fingers for good luck.

For people who suffer from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (O.C.D), these habits take over. They can badly upset a person's day-to-day life.

OCD can be broken into two parts....

- **Obsessions**

and

- **Compulsions**

Obsessions are thoughts or images that are out of our control. They come into the mind when we don't want them to. They can be upsetting and hard to stop. Lots of things can set them off. By and large, obsessions come from feeling unsure or scared. They can cause a lot of worry. People can feel trapped by the thoughts running through their mind.

Common Obsessions

- Fear of dirt, germs, getting ill.
- Fear of acting out violent thoughts or harming others.
- Worrying about order, things being correct.
- Upsetting images that are blasphemous, sexual or morally wrong.

Compulsions are the things that people do to ‘correct’ or ‘put right’ obsessions. Often, compulsions don’t make much sense. People will do the same thing over and over again. This way of coping can make you feel in control. It can make you feel better, but only for a short time. Compulsions don’t have to be actions. They can also be mental acts like counting. Or, people might try to swap a bad mental picture with a good one.

Common Compulsions

- Washing, cleaning
- Checking
- Avoiding things
- Asking for comfort from others
- Thinking “good” thoughts

From time to time, obsessions come from fears we all have. There could be a very small chance that the worry will happen. You might worry that your house will catch fire. You might worry about someone you love dying.

These are common worries. They become a problem when you find you worry about them too much. You can’t stop even when you try hard to.

Worrying too much can be a sign of other problems. With OCD, people try to control their worry. They think they can do this by carrying out compulsions - really it just feeds the problem.

How common is OCD?

If you feel that obsessive thoughts and compulsions have taken over then it is time to regain control. OCD often starts early in life. Both men and women suffer. It is hard to know how many people have problems at any one time. Many people with OCD don't ask for help. More often than not, they are worried about what people will think of them. You might worry people will think you are 'mad' or strange if you tell them.

What Causes OCD?

It is hard to say. There is no one cause for OCD. It could start up after a time of stress. It is likely caused by a mix of different things. Most of us have mild obsessions about one thing or another. This can grow into a problem when the obsessions change the way a person **acts, feels** and **thinks**.

At times of stress, you may learn to link normal, everyday things with fear and worry. You will have gloomy thoughts. These thoughts can change the way you act. Many obsessions are a more powerful version of the worries we all have.

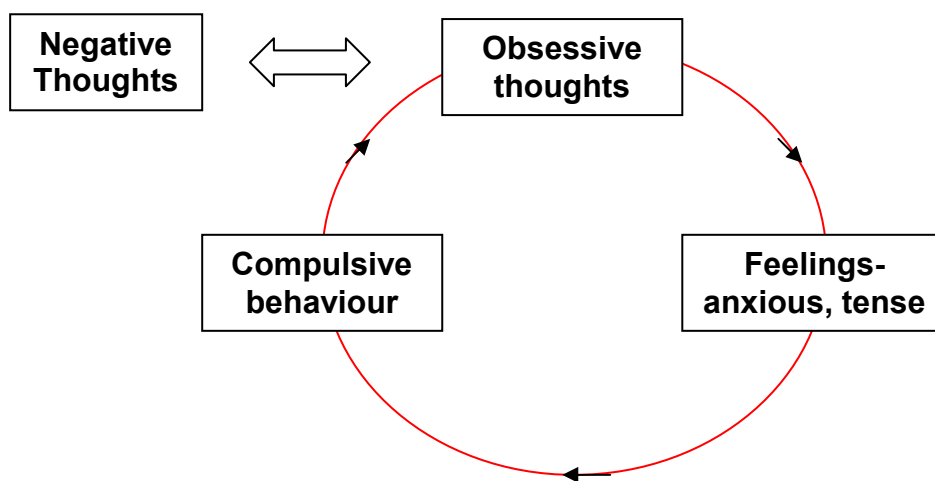
Mild obsessive behaviour is very common and it can be useful. If you worry about doing something 'the right way' it can help you to do it well. But, if you suffer from OCD, obsessions are upsetting. They make day-to-day life harder. People find they do things without thinking. They can find it hard to control what they do even if they know it isn't helpful.

People are upset by obsessive thoughts because of what they think that thought **means** about them. We all have thoughts that pop in to our heads. They might be strange or troubling. We can usually say 'it's just a thought'. We can think 'it doesn't say anything about me'.

For people with OCD, the thoughts are important. They mean a lot to them. They may feel immoral, dangerous or 'crazy' just for thinking them.

Things that keep OCD going.

Most people that suffer from OCD know what they are doing is not helpful. This can make them feel stuck. They might feel guilty or angry. It is also common for people with OCD to feel down. We can understand what keeps OCD going if we think about a **vicious circle**.....



Someone with OCD will have obsessive or unpleasant thoughts. These thoughts upset them. They make them feel anxious and tense. To feel better they carry out 'habits' or compulsions that will make them feel more in control. But, they don't feel good for long.

Gloomy thoughts like "I must be a terrible person for thinking like this" or "Nothing works, I'll never be able to control this" go through their head. This means the obsessions are more likely to come back.

Thoughts

When you suffer from OCD you are trapped in a circle of thoughts. You can feel hopeless. The thoughts are linked to an emotion. This means they are very hard to control. If something worries or upsets you, it will pop into your head more often. It isn't easy to stop the thoughts. If you try, they are often more likely to stick in your head.

Actions

People with OCD **avoid** things that upset them. This can seem like common sense. But, when you avoid a worrying situation it only makes your fears and doubts stronger. Face the fear. This is the only way to learn that it is not as bad as you think. Another common way of coping is to look for **reassurance** from friends or family. You might ask them to tell you that everything is OK. It is easy to rely on others to make you feel better or to keep you straight. This comfort doesn't make the worry go away in the long term. It really makes your worry stronger. Facing something for yourself is the only way to learn. It will never be as bad as you imagine. Facing it will help you to feel like you can cope. It will help fight the obsession.

Body

The symptoms in your body are the most obvious sign that you feel anxious because of your OCD. If you can learn to control your body, it will be much easier to tackle the vicious circle. Lots of things happen in your body when you feel afraid. You might feel restless and worked up. You might have a tight feeling in your chest or a racing heart. You might feel sick or faint. You will likely feel sweaty and have 'jelly legs'. There are lots of other unpleasant symptoms. All of these feelings make you more afraid. This makes it harder to cope. You can use relaxation to fight this reaction in your body.

The next part of this booklet will help you to tackle the vicious circle.

Part 2

What can I do to help myself?

Face your fears

When something makes you feel anxious and upset, common sense tells you to avoid it. In this case, common sense is wrong! If you stay in a situation where you feel anxious, slowly but surely the anxiety will ease off. You will feel better. Your body will get used to what is happening.

This is called **exposure**. Facing up to a situation helps you to challenge the fears and doubts you have about it. Each time you do this, you will become more sure of yourself. You will learn better ways to cope with the way you feel.

- **Facing your fears step-by-step**

At first, facing up to your fears can seem very hard to do. You will likely feel worse in the short term. But, in the long term you will regain control. The best way to tackle your OCD is to face things one-step at a time. Break down the challenges. This way, it is easier to manage.

It might be helpful to make a list of all the things that worry you. Think about the list you have made and use it to make an 'anxiety pyramid'. Things that only cause you a little anxiety should be at the bottom of the pyramid. Put your worst fears at the top.

Before you start to face each fear, prepare for how you will feel. You can do this by practicing relaxation (see later in this booklet) and thinking of positive things you can say to yourself for e.g. "I can cope with this" and "I feel terrible just now but this will pass, I'm not in danger."

MOST FEARED

8.....

7.....

6.....

5.....

4.....

3.....

2.....

1.....

LEAST FEARED

The first step

Now that you have made your pyramid you can start to face your fears. Start with step number 1. Practise doing it until you notice your anxiety lessen. You will likely have to try each step several times. It is a good idea to write down how anxious you feel each time. Rate it from 1 to 10 (with 10 being the most anxious). This will help you to see how your feelings are changing.

Don't be tempted to move on to the next step until you feel able to cope with the first one.

- It might help to think about an example.

Alison has a fear of contamination. She worries that she will pick up germs and pass them on to her family.

The first step on her anxiety pyramid might be touching her front door handle without gloves or a hankie to cover her hands.

Alison would practice touching the handle until she no longer felt anxious. She will also fight the urge to wash her hands afterwards.

At first, her anxiety will be at level 10 but the longer she keeps her hand on the door handle the better she will feel. The anxiety will ease off.

When Alison feels at ease with this step she will move on to the next challenge.

At first, you will find facing up to the things on your list very hard. You will feel very uneasy. This will mean that you will have a strong need to carry out a compulsive act. It is important to break this cycle.

Response prevention

To break the vicious circle of OCD you must fight the urge to carry out your compulsions. This is not easy. At first, you might feel that you need reassurance from friends or family that everything will be ok.

Think about Alison's example - she might feel better if she asks her husband to tell her that everything is ok. But, this will only make her fears stronger in the long run. To feel more confident you must practice coping well by yourself...

- Ask your friends and family to help by not taking part in your compulsions.
- It is important that no one reassures you.
- Take your time and try not to be hard on yourself.
- Make sure that you don't replace old compulsions with new ones. If you usually have to wash your hands make sure you don't replace this with hand rubbing.
- If you find stopping the compulsions impossible, try to cut them down in small steps. For example, if you must wash your hands after touching another person, try to do it for less time, use less soap, use cold water instead of hot.

Challenging Negative Thinking

As well as changing how you act, it is important to fight the negative thoughts that keep OCD going.

You will likely find that the negative thoughts get worse when you begin to fight your OCD. More often than not, they are criticisms of yourself - "I'm a failure." or "I must be a terrible person for thinking like this." or "Nothing works, I'll never be able to control this."

These thoughts are part of the vicious circle. They lower your mood and make you feel tense. This makes it more difficult to tackle the obsessions.

Here are some things you can try that will help you to control your thoughts...

- Write the thoughts down in a diary. Write down how they are making you feel. This will help you to see if there is a pattern. It will be easier to control the thoughts if you know what triggers them.
- You will find that your thoughts are biased. It is important to come to a more balanced conclusion. Think of a '**Big Challenge Thought**'. If your thought is - "Nothing works, I'll never be able to control this." - come up with another way of looking at it - "I can learn to deal with this". Find evidence to support your positive thought. Can you think of a time when you have coped well with something else?
- Look at the evidence on both sides. Don't assume your negative thought or obsessive worry is true. Rate how much you believe in the thought (0-100%). Then, after looking at all of the evidence, re-rate how strong your belief is. Is it a fact or just what you think?
- Put yourself in someone else's shoes. What advice would you give a friend in your situation? How might someone else see you or your situation? Ask people that you trust what they think. Use what they say to help you to reach a more balanced view.
- Face your fears! Be prepared to go into difficult situations on your list by relaxing and controlling your breathing. Think positively; think "I am in control." Negative thinking feeds the worry
- Try not to be too hard on yourself. Think about what you can say to yourself that is more helpful and less worrying.

What if my thoughts are compulsions?

Sometimes obsessive thoughts are followed by thoughts to 'put them right'. Instead of acting out a compulsion you may try to think 'good' thoughts to fight the obsession. An example of this might be thinking "I am a good person, I would never hurt anyone" after thinking about hurting a friend or relative.

- **Accept** the thought - don't try to put it right. Don't try to stop thinking about it. If you are told stop thinking about a pink elephant all you can think about is a pink elephant! Let it pass.
- You are worried about what that thought **means**. You might think it means you are a bad person. You might think you are going crazy. Challenge this kind of thinking. Weigh up the evidence – Are you really a bad person? What do others think? What else makes you a good person? Thoughts are not the same as actions. We can't always control them.
- You will have good days and bad days. Don't let bad days set you back. Take things one step at a time. Give yourself credit when you cope well.

Preparing for the challenge - Relaxation

To tackle your OCD you will have to face your fears. You will have to challenge your obsessive thoughts. It is important to think about how you will prepare for this. You will feel very anxious and uncomfortable when you first begin to tackle your OCD.

Learning to control your breathing will help you to cope better. In situations that make you feel very upset and tense your body will be going into overdrive.

Feeling prepared will help you to feel more in control. If you can control your body it will be much easier to tackle the thoughts that worry you.

Take a breath in and think “1”.

Breathe out and think, “relax”.

Take a breath in and think “2”.

Breathe out and think, “relax”.

Repeat up to 10 and then back down to 1.

Concentrate only on breathing and the number and on “relax” in the mind’s eye. Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths a minute). Breathe in through your nose. Purse your lips and breathe out slowly through your mouth. Practice this breathing technique and use it to help you relax when you feel anxious.

You can download the relaxation CD from our website www.glasgowsteps.com. You can also download a booklet that will help you to get the best out of the CD.

In Summary....

- Prepare - practice relaxation, control your breathing.
- Face what you fear - don't avoid things.
- Don't rely too much on others - practice coping by yourself.
- Work hard to stop yourself carrying out compulsive acts when you feel anxious.
- Challenge any negative or compulsive thoughts.
- Don't be too hard on yourself - focus on what you *can* cope well with.
- Take your time, take things step-by-step - you will have good and bad days.
- Talk things through with someone you trust.

What if I have other problems because of my OCD?

Living with OCD is very stressful and you may cope by drinking more alcohol or smoking too much. People with OCD can also suffer from other mental health problems like depression, poor sleep, panic attacks or anger problems.

The strain of living with OCD often leads to a breakdown of relationships within your family, work and social life. All of these problems feed into the vicious circle and make it harder to break.

If you feel that you would like more help with another problem, then STEPS may be able to help.

- Speak to your GP
- Download self help from our website www.glasgowsteps.com
- Ask for our other self help booklets to be sent out to you.

To find out more about OCD you can read “**Understanding Obsessions & Compulsions**” Tallis, F. 1992. You will find this in any Glasgow library in the STEPS Healthy Reading section.

Other organisations that can help

The Glasgow OCD Support Group

0141 569 5852/ 0141 942 5460

This group is voluntary and open to all OCD sufferers and their carers. You can simply turn up at the meetings, which are the first Wednesday of each month at 6.30pm. For more details call Elizabeth on 0141 569 5852 or Pamela on 0141 942 5460.

OCD UK

www.ocduk.org

0870 126 9506

OCD-UK is a brand new charity for sufferers of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It aims to bring the facts about OCD to the UK public and to support those who suffer in silence.

No Panic

www.nopanic.org.uk

Enquiries: 01952 590 005 Helpline: 0808 808 0545

Offers a written recovery program for OCD sufferers (£12) as well as a free telephone helpline.

First Steps to Freedom

www.first-steps.org

Helpline: 10am to 10pm, 7 days – 0845 120 2916

A registered charity which aims to help, in a practical way, people who suffer from phobias, OCD, general anxiety, panic attacks, anorexia and bulimia, those who wish to come off tranquillizers, together with help for carers. You can talk over your anxiety problems with trained volunteers who understand and care how you are feeling.