WHAT IS OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD)?

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is an Anxiety Disorder that is mainly characterised by intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and behaviours (compulsions). Individuals with OCD are besieged by patterns of unwanted, repetitive thoughts and repetitious behaviours that are distressing and difficult to ignore or overcome completely.

Am I the only one?
OCD is the fourth most commonly occurring psychiatric disorder after substance abuse, major depression and phobias. OCD can affect anyone regardless of class, culture, sex, status or level of intelligence. On average OCD affects 2-3% of the Australian population (Robins et al, 1984). That means that about 450,000 Australians will suffer from OCD during some stage of their lives.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder can affect people in many different ways. Not all people experience the same symptoms or the same degree of intensity of symptoms, although all people who suffer from OCD experience obsessions and/or compulsions.

Obsessions are intrusive, unwanted and often disturbing thoughts that the person cannot control. Persistent fears of contamination, that they are to blame for something or an overwhelming need to do things perfectly are common. Time after time, the individual will experience a distressing and anxiety-provoking thought, such as, "have I left the iron on?", "have I injured somebody else?" or "do I have something physically wrong with me?"

Compulsions are repetitive, distressing and purposeful physical behaviours, which may relate to the obsessive thoughts. Examples of compulsive behaviours include the need of the individual to repeatedly wash their hands due to the fear of contamination, the constant need to check that things have been done, like whether doors or windows have been locked, or even avoidance of certain objects and situations (holes in the road, cracks or lines in pavement).

All of these compulsive behaviours are a way for the person to try to reduce their feelings of anxiety. This repetitive behaviour can interfere with a person's life to the extent that the individual cannot leave home or function at school or at work because of the many hours spent performing these rituals.

WHAT CAUSES OCD?

The exact causes of OCD are not fully understood. There are, however, a number of possible theories which suggest that it could be genetic, a result of the effects of interaction between behaviour and the environment, beliefs and attitudes or even chemical changes in the brain, usually related to the brain chemical serotonin.
WHAT TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE?

Although there is currently no one theory that can explain precisely all causes of this disorder, there are a number of very effective treatments and therapies (see overleaf) for OCD. It was once considered to be an extremely rare disorder that was largely untreatable. But when studies revealed that OCD was much more common than believed, the disorder began attracting much more attention from researchers. Consequently, breakthroughs in treatment of OCD have occurred and OCD is now a major focus of research in the mental health area.

**Behaviour Therapy:** This type of therapy is a step-by-step structured technique tailored by therapists to suit individual clients. Essentially behaviour therapy is about 'unlearning' disruptive patterns and replacing them with new behaviours.

**Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT):** Cognitive behaviour therapy challenges the person's thought patterns and behaviour. Cognitive therapists focus their treatment on assisting the person to modify thoughts causing their unwanted behaviour. In the case of OCD, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy can prepare the ground for the use of behaviour therapy and can also help to prevent any future return of the symptoms after the treatment has finished.

**Pharmacotherapy:** Anti-depressant drugs, which specifically affect the serotonergic neurotransmitter system, are the most useful of pharmacological interventions. These drugs are not addictive substances and work on correcting chemical imbalances within the brain. This is thought to reduce patterns of compulsive behaviour. Unfortunately, medications are not equally effective for all sufferers.

**Psychotherapy:** This is a form of 'talking' therapy. It can help the individual to understand and contemplate their feelings and the difficulties they experience directly as a result of the disorder.

**Support Groups:** Support groups provide support, friendship, education, understanding and information for the individual with this disorder and to their friends and family. Presently in NSW alone there are eleven support groups for people living with OCD. Seven of these support groups are located in the Sydney metropolitan area, with four in regional NSW.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- Your local Community Health Centre
- General Practitioner
- Anxiety Disorders Alliance on 02 9570 4126 or 1800 626 077
- Australian Psychological Society 1800 333 497 for a referral to a psychologist in your area.
- Mental Health Information Service (02) 9816 5688 or toll free 1800 674 200 for referral to services in your area.


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