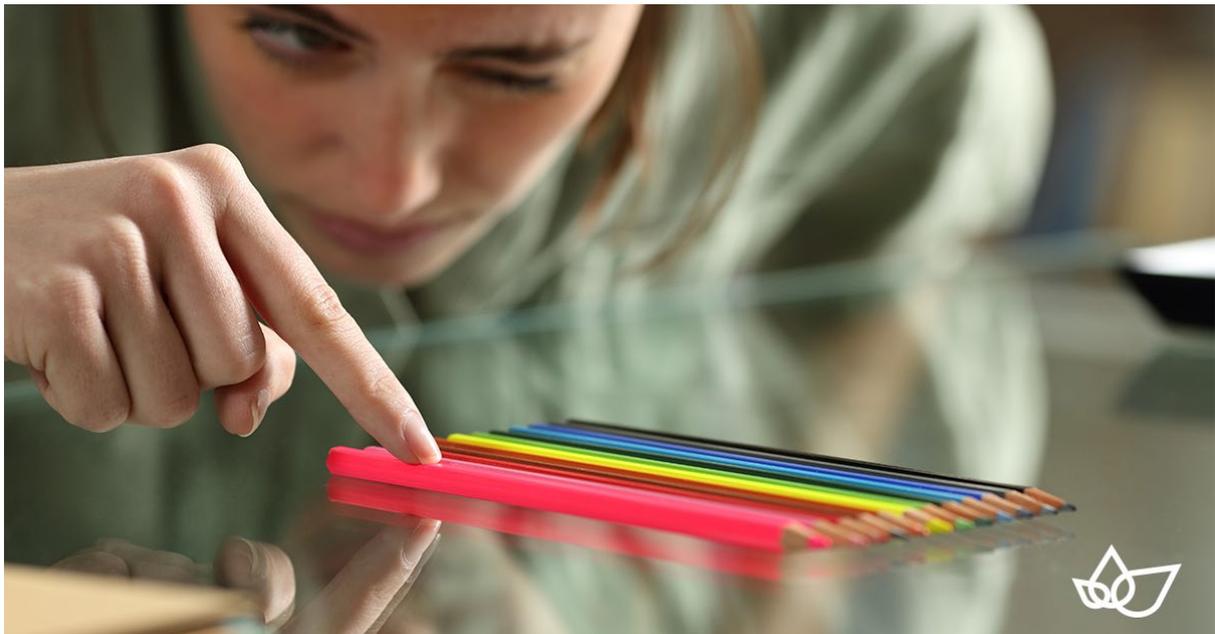


Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: So Much More Than a Mere Quirk

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Breaking down the misconceptions and mislabelling of OCD

At some point or another, we've all been guilty of describing ourselves as *a little OCD...*

Whether we're referring to cleanliness, organisation, or a preference for straight lines and continuity, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) has long been used as an adjective to describe a liking for neatness and order.

However, the reality of OCD is that sufferers are afflicted by a debilitating condition that governs their every waking moment. It is born of a need to maintain control and manifests itself as rituals or behaviour patterns which more than [1 in 50](#) people across the UK find impossible to break free from.

Essentially, OCD is categorised by two main distinctions:

Obsessions, which present themselves as intrusive thoughts or mental images and are often disturbing in nature.

Compulsions, which take the form of repetitive actions to reduce the anxiety brought about by the obsession.

Let's look a little closer at the obsessions experienced by OCD sufferers. Like any intrusive thought, these obsessions are unwanted and persistent. They disrupt your thinking and leave you feeling disturbed, frightened – and sometimes, disgusted.

That's because OCD obsessions have an uncanny ability to bring your deepest, darkest fears to life. They identify what you fear or hate most and, like a nightmare, they push themselves into your mind's eye - forcing you to face these images again, and again, and again...

Think of these obsessions as being similar to the 'Ludovico technique' in Stanley Kubrick's iconic film, *A Clockwork Orange*. In an experimental form of aversion therapy, protagonist and convicted criminal Alex DeLarge is strapped to a chair while his eyes are propped open using a specula device. He is then forced to watch disturbing imagery (which he is unable to look away from) until he becomes nauseous, at which point he should start to associate violence and criminal behaviour with sickness and thus be less likely to commit crime in the future.

OCD feels like a very similar experience. Because these obsessive images are taking place in your mind, you feel completely helpless and unable to 'look away.' Just as Alex was desperate to close his eyes to the disturbing visuals in front of him, OCD sufferers are forced to view what they fear most and must develop their own ways of coping to minimise or neutralise these intrusive thoughts.

Typically, those with OCD will experience one or more of four particular obsessions:

1. **Unwanted intrusive thoughts** - often of a sexual, violent, or disturbing nature

2. **Perfectionism** – characterised by a fixation with symmetry, organisation, or rule abiding
3. **Relational obsessions** – in which a sufferer worries about a familial or romantic relationship
4. **Contamination** – where an individual fears becoming contaminated, contaminating others, or spreading germs

Without the proper support to manage these obsessions, people living with OCD feel that they must construct their own coping mechanisms. That's where compulsions come in.

Compulsions are a way to abate these obsessive thoughts and prevent perceived harm from coming to the sufferer or their loved ones. Much like praying, they offer a way to maintain some sort of control over the universe while experiencing a sense of comfort and relief. But, because OCD is blighted by misinformation and misunderstanding, many people believe hand washing and turning light switches on and off to be the defining compulsions linked with this disorder.

However, The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) [found](#) that OCD sufferers experience a range of debilitating compulsions that affect their day-to-day life. The most prevalent were identified as:

- Checking (taps, ovens, locks, etc.)
- Cleaning, washing, and sanitising
- Repetitive acts
- Mental compulsions (reciting specific words, prayers, or phrases in a set manner)
- Creating order, symmetry, or exactness. Arranging items in 'the right way'
- Hoarding/collecting
- Counting in patterns

What links these compulsions is an overriding fear that something bad will happen if they are not carried out.

What Causes OCD?

While an official cause of OCD has yet to be identified, there are many [theories](#) that suggest the disorder is neurobiological, genetic, or the result of a learned behaviour. It can also be triggered by major life events such as pregnancy or divorce and may also occur as a result of experiencing depression, stress, or trauma.

Although OCD has been anecdotally linked with autism, and despite being characterised by similar symptoms, they are in fact very different conditions. OCD is a mental health disorder that can develop at any point during a person's lifetime, whereas autism is a developmental condition caused by differences in the brain.

Stamping out the Stigma

If you are affected by OCD, it's important to remember that you are not defined by your intrusive thoughts. It can be easy to feel like a terrible person when your mind is constantly filled with disturbing, violent, or indecent images. However, you should realise that these images are disturbing for a reason – and that is because you are fundamentally repulsed or frightened by them. You are not enjoying them or thinking about these things of your own free will. Rather, you are being forced to view this relentless imagery much like the ill-fated Alex DeLarge in *A Clockwork Orange*.

When it comes to stamping out the stigma that surrounds OCD, non-sufferers have a big part to play, too. Trivialising the disorder with phrases like *"I'm so OCD"* is not only regressive to our understanding of the condition, but also makes those affected feel invalidated and more likely to continue suffering in silence.

Dressing OCD up as something beneficial or desirable is also unhelpful, as it makes people believe they are at an advantage if they have the condition. In reality, being detail orientated or having high organisational skills are simply personality traits, and not a byproduct of this debilitating disorder.

Overcoming OCD

If intrusive thoughts and compulsions are affecting your day-to-day life, it's vital to reach out for professional support. To do this, you can:

- Refer yourself to an [NHS talking therapies service](#) in your area
- Book an appointment with your GP to discuss your symptoms and support options

Along with talk-based therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), effective treatments for OCD also include medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which can help to alleviate the symptoms by altering the chemical balance of your brain.

There are also small steps you can take to manage OCD symptoms in the here and now, including:

- Learning to identify your intrusive thoughts and understanding that they are not a true representation of your beliefs or desires
- Accepting these thoughts and not trying to make them 'go away' with ritualistic habits or thought patterns
- Understanding that risk is a part of life and some things are out of your control, however scary that thought might be
- Reading self-help books such as *Overcoming Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts* by Martin N. Seif and Sally M. Winston. This book offers effective CBT tips to help you get unstuck from disturbing thoughts

We hope this blog has inspired you to take action and reclaim your mind from the grip of OCD. We also hope that those who are fortunate enough not to be

affected by OCD understand the gravity of this condition and that it is so much more than a mere quirk or eccentricity. It is a devastating and debilitating affliction – but one that can be managed and overcome with positive action and professional support.

If your employer offers Vivup's Employee Assistance Programme, there are lots of useful resources that can help you manage anxiety disorders such as OCD. Plus, you can also access a 24-hour telephone helpline for responsive, confidential, and totally independent advice should you or a colleague need mental health support.

Sources

[Causes of OCD - Mind](#)

[Symptoms of OCD - Mind](#)

[What are the signs and symptoms of Obsessive compulsive disorder \(OCD\) \(rethink.org\)](#)

[Overview | Obsessive-compulsive disorder and body dysmorphic disorder: treatment | Guidance | NICE](#)

[OCD and Stigma | OCD-UK \(ocduk.org\)](#)

[Overview - Obsessive compulsive disorder \(OCD\) - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)