



Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a disorder in which people have recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas or sensations (obsessions). To get rid of the thoughts, they feel driven to do something repetitively (compulsions). The repetitive behaviors, such as hand washing/cleaning, checking on things, mental acts (like counting), or other activities, can significantly interfere with a person's daily activities and social interactions.

Many people without OCD have distressing thoughts or repetitive behaviors. However, these do not typically disrupt daily life. For people with OCD, thoughts are persistent and intrusive, and behaviors are rigid. Not performing the behaviors commonly causes great distress, often attached to a specific fear of dire consequences (to self or loved ones) if the behaviors are not completed. Many people with OCD know or suspect their obsessional thoughts are not realistic; others may think they could be true. Even if they know their obsessional thoughts are not realistic, people with OCD have difficulty disengaging from the obsessive thoughts or stopping the compulsive actions.

A diagnosis of OCD requires the presence of obsessional thoughts and/or compulsions that are time-consuming (more than one hour a day), cause significant distress, and impair work or social functioning. OCD affects 2-3% of people in the United States, and among adults, slightly more women than men are affected. OCD often begins in childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood. Some people may have some symptoms of OCD but not meet full criteria for this disorder.

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Expert Q&A: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

People casually talk about being “obsessed” or even use the term “OCD” in a casual context. What is the distinction between normal, or even “quirky,” behavior, such as liking a very clean house, and the disorder? 

I have OCD, any suggestions on how to talk to family and friends about it? 

Will OCD symptoms typically get worse over time if a person does not get treated? 

I have a family member recently diagnosed with ODC, how can I best help and support her? 

Does OCD run in families? 



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Medical leadership for mind, brain and body.

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