

What is 'Obsessive Compulsive Disorder' (OCD)?

OCD is an anxiety disorder affecting about two percent of the population. Sufferers are disabled by obsessions that are persistent, unwanted, involuntary and intrusive thoughts. The sufferer may or may not recognise these thoughts as irrational or excessive. They are not able to neither control these thoughts nor effectively limit their intrusiveness, nor the anxiety they cause. Sufferers may be further disabled by compulsions which are persistent needs to act and repeats acts are also to try and control the obsession.

Sufferers are often acutely embarrassed about their symptoms and may keep them a secret for years, at times even from their close friends. Those affected can live in their own private hell for years, while outwardly seeming to cope well and to lead a relatively normal life. The latter is an illusion which is only maintained at great cost in time, energy, stress and personal effort.

What are the symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder?

Some common obsessions are thoughts that sufferers are dirty or contaminated that they unwittingly have harmed others in some manner, and that they are to blame for something or another. These obsessions can vary from time to time both in nature and severity.

The most common compulsions involve cleaning and checking. For examples, a sufferer can have the obsession that their hands are dirty after being to the toilet, and no matter how many times they wash and re-wash their hands, they still feel they are dirty. Their anxiety may not only be that they are dirty themselves, but that they may infect others, contaminate foodstuffs and so forth. They may know that further washing is unnecessary, but cannot stop the feeling of needing to wash and re-wash. Similarly, compulsions to check may involve repeatedly checking light and power switches to ensure that they are off, or checking the locks to ensure that they are secure despite knowing that they had only just been checked confirmed that the switches were off and

the locks were shut.

Carrying out a compulsion may momentarily reduce the obsessional thought and associated anxiety, but these may almost immediately return so that the cycle has to be repeated. These persistent thoughts and repeated acts may occupy hours of a sufferer's time, can be exhausting, and can stop them doing other work or leisure activities. The symptoms can seem inexplicable, irritating and frustrating to the families, friends and workmates of sufferers.

What are the causes of 'Obsessive Compulsive Disorder'?

There are many theories about possible causes but the exact causes are unknown.

Theories include the possibility of a slight genetic predisposition, effects of behaviours, after-effects of some infections of the brain, and changes in one or more brain chemical systems especially changes linked to the brain chemical called serotonin (5HT). No one theory explains all cases and the causes still remain a mystery.

It is important to realise that for a proportion of sufferers, the symptoms of obsessions and compulsions result from other illnesses. These disorders include, infections of the

brain, the after effects of some brain trauma, dementia, and other psychiatric disorders like depression and schizophrenia.

How is 'Obsessive Compulsive Disorder' treated?

This depends on the symptoms and severity of the disorder. It is common for therapists to use several treatment techniques at the same time.

Behaviour Therapy:

This includes ways of helping the sufferer to acknowledge their thoughts and behaviours and ways to control them.

Medicine:

Some antidepressants, especially those which can affect serotonin, can help the disorder.

These medicines can only be prescribed by a medical practitioner. You will not become physically dependent on the tablets but they do have side effects and need to be monitored.

Psychotherapy:

Talking to a trained therapist can help in understanding symptoms, feelings, and difficulties with the disorder so that they individual can be freed from the anxiety associated with the disorder.