



Got **OCD**?

A Guide for Teens

What it is • What it's not • What to do about it



OCD Chicago

What is OCD?

If you've been diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder — or think you might have OCD — this guide is for you.

OCD is a neurobiological disorder.

That means it's in your head, and it has a biological cause. If you don't already know this, OCD causes fears and worries (anxiety) and intrusive thoughts that you can't stop, even when you want to. Those are **obsessions**.

Things you do over and over again — to try to make the anxiety go away — are called **compulsions**. These are actions such as

repeatedly washing your hands or revising your homework paper until you run out of time (but it's still not finished and you think it isn't good enough).

Unfortunately, the more compulsions you do trying to make yourself feel better, the more times you have to do them. Compulsions don't help; they just make the obsessions stronger.

There are a lot of different obsessions and compulsions. In this guide, we'll explain more about them, and ways you can learn to overcome them.

It's Not Funny

Have you noticed some television shows or movies feature stars that supposedly have OCD, or act like they might? These “characters” are played for laughs and sometimes do things that are supposed to be funny. OCD isn't like that in real life and, as you already know, it definitely isn't funny.

Other people can be insensitive, too. It's hard sometimes, but you can't let it get you down. The best thing to do is get evaluated by a specially trained mental health professional. If you do have OCD, they'll help you get treatment so you can manage your OCD. (If you don't have OCD, they can help you figure out what you're dealing with and what to do about that too.)

It's Unfair

Yes, you probably feel that OCD is unfair. It's unfair that you have obsessions and that they make you feel bad. It's unfair that it makes you feel and act “different,” and it gets in the way of having fun, doing your schoolwork and sometimes even having friends.

But it's not your fault, and you don't have to apologize for having OCD. Having untreated OCD is like having a spam filter that has stopped working — the “junk mail” just keeps coming in and you can't stop it. You didn't cause it, but you can fix it. Getting down on yourself won't help you take control over OCD. Getting the right treatment can. And no matter how much your parents (or others) want to help, YOU are the only person who can beat OCD.

Think of it this way. Some teens have diabetes or asthma. They don't like it, but they have it. They learn to manage it. OCD is a lot like that...and you'll learn to manage it, too.



You're not alone. People of all races, ethnicities and genders (as well as ages) have OCD. That's about six million people in the U.S. About one in 100 school-aged kids have OCD right now.

I'm Worried. What If I'm Crazy?

Don't worry. You're not "crazy." OCD is caused by the way your brain functions. You didn't make your brain work the way it does, and nothing your parents did caused it either. Although there MAY be a genetic link, it's not clear that there is because research shows only about 25% of people with OCD have a relative with the disorder. Sometimes it just happens.

You could be fine through grade school and have OCD start showing itself when you enter junior high or high school. It could happen when your body changes during puberty or your symptoms may have started when you were a little kid. No matter when you start to notice unwanted or intrusive thoughts (obsessions), it's important to remember you didn't do anything to cause them.

If you've ever thought (or been told) that you're confused or "stupid," that's also not true. Many people who have OCD have above-average intelligence. Once you're more familiar with what OCD is all about, and understand how treatment can help you, you'll feel a lot better about yourself.

The most effective treatment for OCD is Cognitive Behavior Therapy, or CBT for short. But more about that later.

Will I Ever Get "Back to Normal"?

The majority of teens and adults who have OCD appear to function pretty well. Friends and teachers may not even realize when someone has OCD. But when symptoms worsen, it's time to ask for help. The good news is that most people who have OCD and get the right treatment are able to take control of their OCD instead of letting it control them.





What Does OCD Look Like?

How Can I Tell If What I'm Feeling is OCD — or Not?

OCD symptoms vary from person to person. But there are some “warning signs” that can indicate OCD — or another disorder. Noticing that something is wrong is a step in the right direction, because OCD and other anxiety disorders ARE treatable.

Does This Seem Like You?

One of the reasons OCD is not always easy to diagnose is that everyone has random thoughts that can be disturbing, such as being afraid of getting sick, being unsure about an answer or wondering if they remembered to lock the door. Some worries are normal. But a person with OCD just can't stop thinking about their fear or worry. Ask yourself these questions:

- *Are you spending a long amount of time worrying about something — an hour a day or more?*
- *Are you extremely upset by your thoughts?*
- *Are your fears or worries so persistent (and the compulsive thoughts or actions you do to try to make yourself feel better so time consuming) that they interfere with your normal routines, such as how you are doing in school, social activities, a job or family relationships?*

If you answered “yes” to any of the questions, don't be afraid or ashamed — you may have OCD or another kind of anxiety disorder — or you may be just worrying that you do. It's not something to be upset about or to be ashamed of. It's just something you have to learn to deal with. A doctor or mental health professional trained in CBT therapy can help you get started.

On the next page are some examples of OCD obsessions and what some teens say they do as a result of these unwanted fears.

Some Common Obsessions	Some Common Teen Compulsions
Fear of germs or dirt	I wash my hands over and over lots of times every day. My hands are rubbed so much they hurt. I don't want to touch books or things other people have touched because they could have germs on them. I don't go to the mall anymore because of germs everywhere and I'm afraid to be in the gym or cafeteria at school because they're so "dirty."
Fear of harm or danger; extreme uncertainty	I always worry that our doors and windows at home aren't locked. I have to check them repeatedly or ask my parents to do it for me before I can go to sleep at night. I think something bad will happen to people I love if I don't check the kitchen stove every few minutes to see if it's turned off.
Fear of losing something important to you	I've kept all my old homework papers no matter how many years old they are. I keep broken toys from when I was little. I don't throw away the candy wrappers from candy bars (I have hundreds) or get rid of my old clothes when they don't fit anymore, and I fight with my parents when they try to make me throw things out.
Fear of violating religious rules or being "bad"	I pray all the time – I feel like I have to. I do it to try to keep from going to hell. I know I've done bad things and God is mad at me. Sometimes I'm afraid to go to church services because I might accidentally say curse words – or do something worse. I have to tell about the bad things I've done. I confess my sins but it's never enough.
Morbid thoughts of sex or doing harm to someone	Sometimes I can't even hear what the teachers are saying because I'm trying so hard to NOT think disgusting thoughts about sex. I try to avoid thinking of hurting someone or doing something bad to them. I know everybody thinks about these things sometimes, but I'm over the top.
Need for symmetry	Everything has to be exactly straight or lined up on my desk. At home, I have to "even up" things on a table or in my room. I get so mad when Mom moves something. All my clothes have to be exactly even in my closet or I can't do anything – even eat or sleep – until I've rearranged them.
Fear of not being "perfect"	I keep asking teachers if I did my homework right. I can't help it – I'm afraid I messed up. Sometimes I can't sleep because I have to revise my homework papers so many times. When I was taking a test I erased what I wrote so many times that I wore holes in the paper.
Preoccupation with "magical" numbers or words	I feel like I have to do things in fours. I eat everything four at a time – four bits of hamburger, then four fries, then four sips of soda. I tap each doorway I go through four times. And I button and unbutton my shirt four times every morning. I know behaving like this is senseless, but I can't stop myself.

Managing Your OCD

Getting the Right Treatment So You Can Get On With Your Life

To the point: the most effective treatment for OCD is Cognitive Behavior Therapy — CBT for short. It consists of Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) techniques along with cognitive therapy.

This treatment is different from what you might expect. It's not "analysis" with a lot of talking about your past. And it's not like "relaxation techniques," diet plans or herbal remedies. It's about getting you the practical mental tools you need to outwit OCD. A specially trained behavior therapist knows you can't just stop the fears that cause you to do compulsive actions. They can teach you to use proven tactics to manage your OCD. And you'll be happy to know that, in most cases, the treatment takes weeks or months; it's not endless trips to a therapist. (Occasionally, medication may be prescribed to help during the course of treatment.)

How It Works

In this therapy, a person with OCD is placed in situations where he or she is exposed to what causes their obsessive fears. Then they are gradually asked to stop performing the compulsions they would usually do to temporarily decrease their fears. For example, if you have an obsessive fear of germs in public places, your therapist may encourage you to touch a doorknob or a library book that you believe is dirty, then wait longer and longer to wash your hands. This gradual exposure and delayed response would help you learn to control your usual response.

At first you would be upset by this — maybe even feel afraid. But over time, you would train your body to respond differently to the fear or thought of germs. This new way of confronting your fear head-on would lead to fewer and less intense fears or obsessions about germs.

Why Shouldn't I Just Treat Myself Instead of Going to Therapy?

A therapist trained in CBT knows how to help you responsibly introduce Exposure and Response Prevention techniques into your life, and will guide you so you won't get discouraged. He or she will help you confront more and more difficult situations until your fears begin to subside. The therapist will help you learn to recognize and understand that your brain is sending "error" messages, and help you respond to them in new ways — to control the obsessions and their resulting compulsive actions.

You'll also get "homework" assignments so you can practice between sessions. Learning to manage your OCD under proper guidance can lead to a faster reduction of symptoms because you master your fears better.



How Do I Find The Right Help?

Not all mental health professionals are trained in CBT and ERP. So it's important to find one who is. OCD Chicago can help you and your parents find a treatment provider.



Managing Your Parents and Others at Home

Parents try to help, but they can make you miserable if they are constantly telling you what to do (or not do). Brothers, sisters or other relatives may yell at you and tell you to “Stop it!” Sometimes family members get involved in your rituals or leave you alone to endlessly repeat your compulsive actions — because they are out of ideas. None of this will help, and could even make things worse by increasing everyone's stress.

You can manage best by not losing your temper when they nag at you and by trying to remember that you are not the only one affected by this disorder. You can also refer them to OCD Chicago's web site: www.ocdchicago.org. There are sections on the site for parents and family members to help them understand OCD and its treatment.

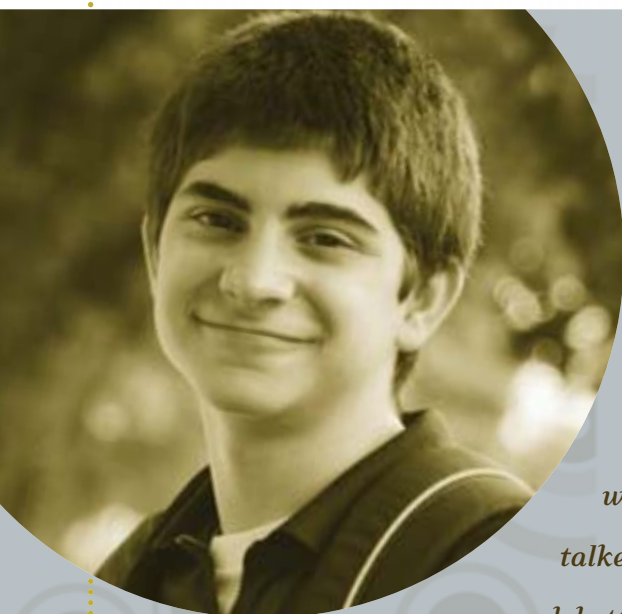
Do Any Kids Ever Beat OCD?

Yes. And you can, too. OCD is a disorder in your brain, and with CBT and ERP treatment you can get the skills to overcome it. Think of it as “empowerment,” or getting control over the OCD — instead of letting it take control of you.

One thing that can be confusing is that sometimes OCD symptoms change or “morph.” You may find, for example, that instead of worrying about germs all the time you start counting your steps constantly, or feeling like you are bad and have to pray for hours every day. This is not all that unusual. The important thing to remember is that getting the proper treatment helps.



Success Stories



Tyler used to count every step he took, and he had to go in and out of the door to his school classrooms a certain number of times before he could “safely” go in. His classmates ridiculed him (it felt like torture to face them). His school counselor was very understanding and together they talked with Tyler’s parents. Now, with CBT, Tyler is much better and the bullying has stopped.



Emily learned to manage her fear of germs by working hard at Exposure and Response Prevention exercises with a great therapist. She had always been careful to wash her hands after using the bathroom, but when she started washing her hands over and over, she knew something wasn’t right. Her hands were red and raw. She was so afraid of germs she panicked if anyone sneezed near her and she started to avoid her friends. Luckily, she spoke up and asked for help. Her family doctor recommended a CBT-trained therapist.

Antwon *missed deadlines and turned in his homework late. He spent far too much time rewriting his words and sentences to make them perfect. The day he took standardized tests he was almost paralyzed with anxiety and never completed the first page. With help from a CBT therapist, Antwon is able to control his fears much better now and his grades are steadily improving.*



Marisol *was secretly terrified she would cause her Dad or her little sister to die. She seemed fine most of the time, but at home she had to check that the front and back doors were locked dozens of times before she could go to sleep at night. This is now past history because of CBT therapy. It hasn't been easy sometimes, but she knows she is now getting better all the time.*



OCD Chicago can help.

Check out the OCD Chicago web site to:

- Read more about symptoms of OCD.
- Learn about symptoms that may not be OCD but could be related disorders.
- Find articles to help you learn more about OCD and treatment that works. Look at www.ocdchicago.org/index.php/parents/teens/.
- Read success stories from teens and adults who've learned to manage their OCD.
- Get links to other recommended web sites, books and more.
- Get in touch with OCD Chicago to talk with someone who can help you get started and refer you to the right treatment provider.

You can do it...you CAN get your life back!



Got **OCD**?

You didn't choose to have OCD. But you *can* choose how you deal with it.

- *You can learn about it and get the right kind of treatment.*

You're not crazy...you have OCD. This biological disorder is just one small part of who you are.

- *You deserve to get relief from your OCD — and feel healthy again!*





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