

# Understanding OCD

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a common mental health condition characterised by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours. This factsheet looks at some common facts about OCD, how it affects people and how to support colleagues with OCD.

## Information about OCD

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a non-visible condition that affects around 1-2% of the population and is widely misunderstood. OCD can present in many different ways, but the two main elements are obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours.

Obsessive thoughts are unwelcome thoughts, images, or emotions that repeatedly appear in the individual's mind, these thoughts can often cause feelings of unease, disgust, and anxiety.

Compulsive behaviours are the repetitive behaviours or mental acts that an individual engages in to provide temporary relief from the unpleasant feelings associated with obsessive thoughts.

Language around OCD is often trivialised and associated with being particular and neat or enjoying routine or order, which can be very damaging for individuals diagnosed with OCD and can further perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes around OCD and cleaning. Whilst compulsive cleaning, hand washing, and checking behaviours are commonly associated with OCD, these are not the only ways that OCD can impact an individual. For example, a person who has obsessive thoughts about their baby coming to harm may compulsively clean and sterilise bottles to provide relief from the fear of germs harming the baby, but an alternative behavioural response could be to repeatedly check the baby is breathing which can result in very little sleep for the individual.

Only 1 in 4 people disclose an anxiety disorder to their employer, with 39% saying they worry that their employer will think it is an excuse to get out of work ([Made of Millions](#)).

Employees with OCD can be highly intelligent, committed, and loyal, often with high levels of focus, good attention to detail, and a wide variety of skillsets. Understanding effective ways to support an employee with OCD can not only dramatically improve the experience of that individual but also have a lasting positive influence on the organisation. Supporting colleagues through reasonable adjustments is a legal requirement and will help ensure their skillsets are maximised.

Ensuring employees with OCD are fully supported is important and that any form of discrimination against employees with OCD is dealt with appropriately. Furthermore, OCD has a differing impact on each individual, and this of course will impact engagement and inclusion throughout the entire organisation.

### What are some facts surrounding OCD?

- OCD is characterised by obsessions and compulsions that take up at least an hour a day – but usually longer – and cause significant distress.
- OCD often runs in families so could be linked to genetics
- It usually starts in childhood but can occur any time throughout adulthood
- It is more common in people who have been bullied, abused, or neglected, and it can also start after an important or stressful life event such as childbirth or bereavement
- Treatment for OCD often includes CBT, talking therapies, and sometimes medication
- Employees who have been diagnosed with OCD are most likely to satisfy the definition of disability under The Equality Act 2010

### What are some of the challenges faced by individuals with OCD?

- **Time management** – sometimes OCD can impact an individual's time management, as obsessive thoughts can trigger compulsive behaviours and rituals that can make leaving the house, travelling, or moving from place to place difficult, such as needing to return home to check appliances are turned off

- **Rumination** – OCD can often make individuals play conversations or thoughts over and over in their head, which can cause the individual to lose focus or concentration, or worry about how they have been perceived by others
- **Crowded spaces** – intrusive thoughts can be triggered by stressful, busy, or crowded situations, which can sometimes make large meetings or open plan offices difficult for employees with OCD.

### What support can be offered people with OCD?

Every person with OCD is different and there is not a one size fits all solution to accommodating OCD in the workplace. The best approach is to create a safe space for colleagues with OCD to talk about how their OCD impacts them and what their needs and preferred support is. Individuals may even be unsure of what their needs are and what reasonable adjustments may be possible.

- Be patient and understand that compulsive behaviours are not a choice
- Explore flexible working options where possible to reduce pressure and potential triggers of a tight schedule
- Allow for short breaks throughout the day to de-stress and time to de-stress from the commute when first entering the workplace
- Allow individuals to have their own space or desk that is not used in their absence
- Allow frequent movement breaks and normalise fidget toys in the office
- Recognise the need for time off for appointments and/or therapy
- Improve understanding of OCD and research
- Create a safe space within the working environment for people to share experiences
- Ensure staff understand the damage of non-inclusive language relating to OCD and mental health such as 'crazy', 'insane', or 'weak', as well as trivialising OCD
- Advertise staff networks & other internal / external support that is available
- Consider and possibly adapt performance management system measures
- Actively promote needs assessments and workplace adjustments

- Allow headphones or noise cancellation headphones in the office
- Allow non-meeting days – days which are blocked from meetings in their calendar
- Provide guidance for planning where several tasks need to be completed to a deadline
- Provide training to line managers and staff to increase understanding of OCD
- Encourage line managers to talk openly and support OCD (using the [Inclusion Passport](#))

### Resources:

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/overview/>

<https://www.verywellmind.com/top-ocd-facts-2510674>

<https://beyondocd.org/ocd-facts>

<https://www.madeofmillions.com/ocd/work-and-ocd>

[https://ocdaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/employing\\_people\\_with\\_ocd\\_0916\\_1.pdf](https://ocdaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/employing_people_with_ocd_0916_1.pdf)

<https://www.spill.chat/mental-health-at-work/how-to-support-someone-with-ocd-at-work>

[Mind: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder information sheet](#)

[OCD Action Book List](#)

[OCD Action: Employing people with OCD](#)

[FAQs on OCD Book](#)

[Dr. Natascha M. Santos - Debunking the myths of OCD \(TED Talk\)](#)