

# OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER: HELP FOR PARTNERS AND FAMILIES

Everyone has bothersome worries now and again. Worries that consume a person are called “obsessions.” Obsessions are uninvited or intrusive thoughts, urges or images that surface in the mind over and over again.

Many people have rituals, or specific ways of doing things. For people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), however, rituals may become “stuck,” and last for hours. When taken to this extreme, rituals are called “compulsions.”

When obsessions and compulsions get out of control, it is called obsessive-compulsive disorder.

## WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE HAS OCD

When someone in a family is ill, everyone is affected, not just the person with the illness. This is true whether the illness is diabetes or OCD. A mental illness brings added pressures. Families often suffer for years before the symptoms are finally diagnosed. People with OCD often try to involve family members in compulsive rituals. To keep the peace, family members may play along or help out with behaviours such as hoarding, checking and washing. Or they might respond with disbelief or denial. Fearing prejudice, they can become isolated.

It's natural for families to feel resentful or disappointed when OCD interferes with normal family life. Acknowledging the illness can help you feel less isolated and guilty and free your energy for caring for both your relative and yourself.

## HOW TO RELATE TO THE FAMILY MEMBER WITH OCD

Learn as much as you can about OCD and its treatment.

View the obsessive-compulsive behaviours as symptoms, not character flaws. Do not allow OCD to take over family life.

- Do not participate in the person's rituals.
- Communicate positively, directly and clearly.
- Keep calm.
- Mix humour with caring.
- Know the signs that show the person is struggling with his or her OCD.
- Support your family member's medication and treatment program.
- Don't forget that you are only human.

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Caught up in concern and caring for the person who is ill, family members may not take proper care of themselves. They may give up their own activities and become isolated from their friends and colleagues. This may go on for some time before they realize they are emotionally and physically drained. The stress can lead to sleeping problems, exhaustion and constant irritability.

- Keep your own support network.
- Avoid becoming isolated.
- Recognize signs of stress in yourself.
- Know what situations within your family are most stressful in coping with OCD.
- Keep up your interests outside the family.
- Consider having your own professional support.
- Take a little time each day just for you.

## EXPLAINING OCD TO CHILDREN

Explaining OCD to children can be awkward and difficult. Many parents may try to continue with family routines as if nothing were wrong.

However, children are sensitive and intuitive. They notice when someone in the family has changed, or when tension surfaces. If the atmosphere in the family suggests that the subject should not be discussed, children will develop their own, often wrong, ideas.

Children need to have illnesses explained to them. It is best to give them as much information as they can understand. Toddlers and preschool children understand simple, short sentences. They need concrete information and not too much technical language. For example: “Sometimes Daddy feels sick and it makes him upset.” “When Mommy is sick, touching the sink makes her upset.”

School-aged children can process more information. They can understand the concept of OCD as an illness, but may be overwhelmed by details about therapies and medications. OCD could be explained to children of this age group like this: “OCD is a kind of illness that makes people worry a lot about germs and getting sick. Worrying so much makes them do things over and over again.”

Teenagers can generally manage most information. Often, they need to talk about their thoughts and feelings. They may ask about the genetics of this illness, or they may worry about the stigma of mental illness.

When speaking to children, it is helpful to cover three main areas:

- The parent or family member behaves this way because he or she is sick.
- The child did not make the parent or family member get this illness.
- Reassure the child that adults in the family and other people, such as doctors, are trying to help the affected person.

## RECOVERY

OCD, like diabetes, is a chronic condition. Modern treatments for OCD offer hope. While they do not “cure” OCD, they control the symptoms. This allows people with OCD to restore normal function in their lives. Family members can play an active role in this process.