VERMONT Consultation & Psychiatry Access PROGRAM

Supporting Pediatric and Perinatal Providers

CAREGIVERS GUIDE

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD)

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WHAT IS OCD?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health condition involving unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges called **obsessions**, along with behaviors or mental rituals called **compulsions**.

Children with OCD may feel that they have to perform certain behaviors or rituals to reduce their anxiety, prevent something bad from happening, or make something feel "just right." These symptoms can take up significant time, cause distress, and interfere with school, relationships, family life, and everyday activities.

WHAT CAN OCD LOOK LIKE?

OCD looks different for every child. Common examples include:

OBSESSIONS	COMPULSIONS
» Fear of germs, illness, or contamination	» Excessive washing or cleaning
» Worry that something bad will happen to themselves or someone they love	» Repeatedly checking things or asking for reassurance
» Needing something to feel "just right" or perfect	» Arranging, ordering, or repeating things until they feel right
» Unwanted scary, violent, sexual, or other upsetting thoughts or images	» Counting, repeating words or phrases, tapping, blinking, or other rituals
» Fear of making a mistake or causing harm	» Re-reading, rewriting, retracing steps, or repeating actions

Having disturbing or unwanted thoughts does not mean that a child wants to act on them. Intrusive thoughts can be particularly upsetting because they are unwanted and may be very different from what the child actually believes or wants.

OCD IS TREATABLE

There are very effective treatments for OCD. The recommended therapy for OCD is a specific form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) called **Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP)**.

ERP helps children gradually practice facing situations that trigger their OCD while learning to resist the compulsions they normally use to reduce their anxiety. Over time, children can learn that they are able to tolerate uncomfortable feelings without relying on compulsions.

Some children may also benefit from medication in addition to therapy. Talk with your child's healthcare provider about the treatment options that may be appropriate.

WHAT CAN CAREGIVERS DO?

- **Learn about OCD together.** Understanding that obsessions and compulsions are symptoms of OCD can help reduce shame and make it easier to work together.
- **Separate your child from the OCD.** Some families find it helpful to give OCD a name, such as "the OCD bully." The goal is to reinforce that **your child is not the problem. OCD is the problem you are working on together.**
- **Respond without shame or criticism.** OCD symptoms can be confusing or frustrating, but children are not choosing to have them.
- **Be mindful of reassurance.** Children with OCD may repeatedly ask caregivers to confirm that something is safe, okay, clean, or unlikely to happen. Although reassurance can reduce anxiety temporarily, repeatedly providing it can become part of the OCD cycle.
- **Reduce family accommodation.** Families understandably want to protect children from distress and may begin changing routines, avoiding triggers, or participating in rituals. Unfortunately, these accommodations can unintentionally strengthen OCD over time.
- **Help your child practice facing fears**. With guidance from an ERP-trained clinician, caregivers can help children gradually face situations that trigger anxiety and practice resisting compulsions.
- **Celebrate brave steps.** Facing OCD is hard work. Praise your child's effort and willingness to practice, rather than expecting anxiety to disappear immediately.

FINDING TREATMENT

When looking for a therapist, seek someone who has specific experience treating children with OCD using Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP). General supportive therapy alone may not adequately treat OCD.

RESOURCES & SUPPORT

- International OCD Foundation **(IOCDF)**: Information about OCD, treatment providers, support groups, and resources for families
- IOCDF Managing OCD in Your Household: Guidance for families on responding to OCD and reducing accommodation
- Child Mind Institute: Resources about OCD and the caregiver's role in treatment
- Vermont Family Network: Vermont-based family support and Parent Match opportunities

ADAPTED FROM: *Resources from the American Psychiatric Association and International OCD Foundation.*

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