

What is OCD?

Obsessive-compulsive Disorder (OCD) is characterized by experiencing cycles of unwanted intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions) that can cause a significant amount of distress for an individual (International OCD Foundation, 2022). This vicious cycle can be debilitating and feel endless for those who struggle with this condition. OCD can latch onto anything you can think of, and obsessions and compulsions can vary for each individual.

Obsessive-compulsive Disorder can be an overwhelming force in a person's life, and can impact even the smallest aspects of life. For some people OCD can cause changes in how they interact with their loved ones, limit what activities they feel they can do in their free time, and even the daily actions everyone does to function in our world (eating, personal hygiene routines, transportation). When most people receive their diagnosis, they have been coping with this disorder for a long time without much improvement. Luckily, mental health providers have been able to find ways to effectively treat this pesky problem.

Exposure and Response Prevention

This type of cognitive behavioral therapy is meant to help people confront the intrusive thoughts and compulsions that plague their everyday lives by slowly exposing the individual to a fear or obsession while resisting the urge to engage in the compulsive behavior that eases their anxiety. Most people have heard the term "exposure therapy" tossed around in the media, and this has caused us to view it in a negative way. The truth of the matter is that ERP does not look like people being forced to engage in painful scenarios where they have no choice but to continue with their treatment. So what does this form of treatment actually look like?

- The first step is determining what "triggers" your OCD. Is there a specific thought that makes you anxious? How often does this happen?
- You'll then work with your therapist to narrow down what intrusive thoughts are the most prevalent and obstructive in your life. Treatment length for OCD typically ranges between 12-14 sessions, but some individuals may make significant progress over fewer appointments (Reichenberg & Seligman, 2016; Samantaray et al., 2019).
- With your counselor you then create exposures, scenarios where you'll face your obsessions, and work through them. During this process you'll notice how your anxiety heightens and then gradually lessens over a period of a few moments. Typically you'll start with exposures that generate less anxiety- think about it on a 1 to 10 scale with 10 being the highest (we start at a 2 or 3 level of anxiety).
- Over time you'll see that you can engage in more anxiety producing exposures to challenge your obsessions (closer to a 5-7 range of anxiety).
- After some time you will then begin to notice how it actually becomes easier to face these fears head on.

The biggest suggestion we give to anyone who is starting their journey with ERP is that you

have to remain consistent with exposures. It can be terrifying to do, but if you keep at it, then you'll begin to notice significant changes in your life. Just breathe and take it one step at a time.