

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder - Information for Schools

“It’s something that’s so well-hidden, and probably something that people think they’re suffering from alone, but I think it’s about time that someone did speak a bit more openly about it to make people feel less alone and more supported.”

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/getting-together/having-a-hard-time-getting-through/managing-obsessive-thoughts-and-compulsions-during-covid-19/>

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a form of mental distress. It is usually first experienced as a child, teenager or young adult. In primary school, about one in two hundred children are troubled by OCD; by adulthood, this rises to about one in one hundred people. Lack of awareness means that individuals often struggle for years with unrecognised OCD. It is important that school counsellors and teachers know about the condition, and how to create a supportive and inclusive school environment for students living with OCD.

Key message - OCD, it’s not what most people think

The term “OCD” is often used lightly when talking about a personal preference for tidiness and organisation. When referred to more seriously, many people think of the behaviour of excessive handwashing. This popular knowledge is misleading in that genuine OCD involves serious mental distress rather than an enjoyable choice, and can focus on a wide variety of themes such as fears about harming others, sexuality, religion and morality, or simply a persistent unsettling sense that something doesn’t feel right. No child should have to live with unrecognised OCD, and the hidden belief that they are a bad person.

Late to arrive at school because of time-consuming compulsions? Checking and re-checking work for mistakes? Filling in the circles on a multi-choice test so slowly and perfectly that there isn’t time to complete the test? Unable to pay attention and tired out because of frightening intrusive thoughts? Worried that they might have cheated or had an unfair advantage in a test? Refusal to use items or spaces that are used by others? Repeated apologies for minor incidents? Arranging and re-arranging things until they are just right? Signs of anxiety or depression?

These are just some of the ways in which OCD can affect students in the school environment. Please take a little time to learn more.

Information for teachers

These two booklets explain the experience of OCD, and how OCD may affect a student’s school life. There are practical suggestions on how to manage any classroom issues and to support learning and participation in school activities.

<https://www.ocdaction.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf-precompiled/ocd-for-school-personnel-guide.pdf>

<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/ASCAU/Anxiety-Stress-Management-Specialist/Teachers-Guide-to-OCD-v1.pdf>

Information for school counsellors

School health professionals need to have some knowledge of OCD, be aware of signs that may suggest a student is experiencing OCD, and know how to promote a supportive and inclusive school environment. Please consider sharing this resource with teaching staff, and mentioning it during staff development sessions.

A student who is able to talk about their feelings of anxiety or depression might also be troubled by disturbing intrusive thoughts, urges or images (obsessions), but feel unable to disclose them. Obsessions often involve taboo subjects such as harm, violence, sexuality, religion and morality. These ideas are troubling precisely because they go against the student's beliefs and values; for example, a caring person may fear that they could violently hurt someone (but in fact, would never do so). A person who experiences OCD often feels so ashamed, frightened or embarrassed that it is difficult for them to tell anyone.

A student may feel obliged to repeatedly do things that their friends do not, but might not realise their actions are actually compulsions. For example, someone with OCD might seek to eliminate uncertainty by repeatedly asking for reassurance and apologising, carrying out mental reviews of past incidents, and avoiding certain situations. These actions are an attempt to confirm that a feared event did not and will not take place.

This UK booklet provides some more detailed information about OCD, and how to help a student who experiences OCD. (Please note that best practice treatment for OCD itself is Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) therapy, a type of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, for which a psychologist with specific expertise in OCD is needed. SSRI medication may also be prescribed.)

<https://nipinthebud.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NITB-RecognisingOCDFactSheet.pdf>

This Australian article was written for GPs, and includes a table of open-ended questions that may help a student to disclose more information about their mental distress. For example: Troubling thoughts can really affect our mood and way of life; do you think this could be the cause of your anxiety? Is there any thought that keeps bothering you that you would like to get rid of, but cannot? Do you have to mentally think things over and over, even though you don't want to?

<https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2013/september/ocd/>

These two articles and a book consider OCD from the perspective of a teenager.

<https://beyondocd.org/expert-perspectives/articles/how-to-manage-your-parents-when-you-have-ocd-a-guide-for-teens>

<https://beyondocd.org/just-for-teens>

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ben-sedley/stuff-thats-loud/>

Encouraging a supportive social environment

“It is trivialised, for example with the Minister of Health saying ‘now is the time to be OCD’, or Khloe Kardashian saying she’s got ‘Khlo-CD’. It’s always very disrespectful to us and reinforces myths that OCD is all about cleaning and contamination. There are many other forms it can come in.”

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/getting-through-together/having-a-hard-time-getting-through/managing-obsessive-thoughts-and-compulsions-during-covid-19/>

To improve the student community’s understanding of OCD and promote positive attitudes about lived experience of OCD, consider the role of the school library. Ensure that there are age-appropriate books with diverse representation of real-life individuals or fictional characters with OCD.

<https://www.pragmaticmom.com/2017/09/ocd-characters-childrens-books/>

<https://bookriot.com/2019/07/23/ya-books-about-obsessive-compulsive-disorder/>

<https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/blogs/post/stacy-greggs-latest-pony-book-is-close-to-home-an-interview-with-the-author-of-the-thunderbolt-pony/>

OCD is not a synonym for being tidy, hygienic or meticulous nor for being passionate about an enjoyable activity. Encourage staff and students to use the term accurately.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/28/stephen-fry-ocd-eyes-tweet-mental-illness>

Consider marking International OCD Awareness Week, in a positive way with a focus on lived experience rather than medical information eg a book display in the library or a short video during assembly.

<https://iocdf.org/programs/ocdweek/>

Further information and support

The information provided here has been gathered together by several members of Fixate, a New Zealand support group for individuals living with OCD and those who support someone with OCD.

Fixate brings people together via a Facebook group. Members of the group share experiences and information, form connections and advocate for OCD awareness. Parents of newly diagnosed children appreciate the support and knowledge of parents further down the track, and of adults with lived experience of OCD. Often a child or teenager has never met anyone else with the disorder, and may feel isolated. Although membership of the Facebook group is for adults, connections made there make it easier for families to find each other.

www.ocd.org.nz; email ocd.org.nz@gmail.com

Disclaimer: We are volunteers, not health professionals. This information was gathered from reputable sources. Marion Maw, 25 May 2020.