



OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

WHAT IS OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER?

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder where patients have repeated intrusive thoughts, images or impulses (obsessions), recognised as a product of their own mind and which are inappropriate and excessive. The obsessions make them feel driven to perform repetitive behaviours (compulsions) in order to neutralise the associated anxiety or to prevent a feared situation from happening. Obsessions and compulsions may seem impossible to stop or control.

However, compulsions only provide temporary relief. Moreover, they are not only time-consuming (typically lasting over an hour a day), but also interfere significantly with daily functioning. Not performing the compulsions however, causes overwhelming anxiety. Some examples of obsessions include excessive concerns about contamination or harm, the need for symmetry or exactness and forbidden sexual or religious thoughts. Typical compulsive behaviours include repetitive washing, checking, re-arranging things, counting and hoarding.

Some even have mental compulsions such as silently praying repetitively in response to intrusive obsessive thoughts.

In Singapore, it is estimated that OCD occurs in 3 out of every 100 people in their lifetime. It is especially common among adolescents, with a mean age of onset of 19 years. As yet, the cause of the illness is unknown, although the most likely contributory factors are altered brain biochemistry or genetic factors.

TREATMENT

The main treatment options available are medications, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or both.

Medications commonly used are known as Selective Serotonin Re-uptake Inhibitors (SSRIs). They are typically prescribed in high doses, but which may take several weeks to work.

CBT involving exposure-and-response prevention (ERP) is effective. During treatment, you are gradually exposed to anxiety-provoking situations and at the same time, you are advised to delay or refrain from performing rituals.

Sometimes, when neither medications nor CBT results in satisfactory improvement, a combination of both treatments may be prescribed.

Do discuss with your mental health specialist about which treatment may be the best for you.