

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Identifying Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Imagine walking into your kitchen. You've just finished dinner so the counter is a bit messy. If you're like most people, you'd probably clean it up and then forget about it. But what if you couldn't forget? If the image of the dirty counter went around your head until you felt physically sick?

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) affects about one in 40 people, or 2.5 per cent of the population. It causes them to obsess over thoughts and repeat a series of ritual actions, or compulsions. Obsessions and compulsions vary, but cleanliness, symmetry, order and food are the most common.

Many sufferers are "perfectionists" who need all surfaces to be completely clean, or all objects arranged in exactly the right way. The fear of losing something important may result in hoarding useless objects for years. Many people with OCD also invent elaborate rituals for everyday actions like opening doors or hand washing.

What Causes OCD?

While nobody really understands the exact cause, scientists do know that OCD patients have low levels of serotonin, which results in problems communicating information from the front of the brain to deeper areas. Research also suggests that children who've had strep throat are at higher risk.

OCD can be genetic. If a family member suffers from the disorder, close relatives stand a 25 per cent chance of developing it. It's usually triggered by a stressful situation or event. Common triggers include:

- Important or significant life changes, such as a marriage, death, or a new job
- Use of street drugs or alcohol abuse
- An episode of depression or anxiety
- In rare cases, a physical illness

What Should You Look For?

OCD can be a difficult disorder to detect. While most sufferers know they have a problem, embarrassment causes them to cover up symptoms. Signs of OCD include:

- **Rituals of Entering Rooms.** These can include touching certain parts of the door, or avoiding stepping on cracks.

- **Obsession with Cleanliness and Eating.** OCD sufferers are usually obsessed with germs and dirt. They tend to clean objects repeatedly, and feel uncomfortable with the smallest messes. Rituals involving eating, handling in a ceremonious way or avoiding specific foods are common.

- **A Fixation with Perfection.** People with OCD spend a great deal of time organizing objects until they are perfectly symmetrical, or match a certain order, becoming agitated if something is out of place.

- **Repeated Checking.** One major characteristic of OCD is the need to repeat an action. Constantly checking the time, rifling through pockets or saying the same phrase several times are common.

© 2026 Morneau Shepell Ltd.

- **Controlling Behaviors.** OCD sufferers often need things to be arranged in certain ways. They often force people to follow their instructions and get angry if things aren't done according to their orders.

- **Low Self-Esteem.** Many sufferers realize the devastating toll OCD takes. This awareness can batter confidence and build negative feelings of self-worth.

OCD is also linked with hypochondria, a fear of getting sick, dysmorphia, an obsession with physical appearance, and Tourette's syndrome, which causes verbal and facial tics.

Unlike addictive illnesses such as alcoholism or gambling addiction, OCD victims never feel any real pleasure from acting on compulsions. Many compare it to scratching an itch. It's something they need to do to relieve a nagging problem. It may offer temporary relief but the compulsion eventually takes up so much time that it becomes impossible for the sufferer to live a normal life.

If you suspect that you or someone you love has OCD, it's vital that you consult a professional for a proper diagnosis. While several treatments for OCD show great success, if left untreated, the compulsive behavior can grow significantly worse.