

OCD At School



OCD GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL

WHAT IS THIS GUIDE ALL ABOUT?

There are currently around 130,000 young people at school in the UK with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Many try to hide their upsetting symptoms, frightened about what would happen if they opened up to their friends or a teacher.

It is important to remember that parents may not always be the first to recognise that their child has a problem. With the many hours that young people spend at school, you, as a member of school personnel, will be in a unique position to observe and interact with students for extended periods of time. As well as this, school staff may have information from other school children who are aware that a student in their class is upset or behaving strangely.

The aim of this guide is to provide you with a basic overview of OCD in young people, the signs of OCD and how you can work with a young person and their parents to manage OCD at school.

- Karen, Secondary school teacher

ocdaction
it's time to act

WHAT IS OCD?

OCD is an anxiety disorder characterised by unpleasant and recurring thoughts, images, doubts or urges (called obsessions) and repetitive and irrational behaviours (called compulsions). Compulsions, also known as rituals, may be observable behaviours (such as washing or tapping) or mental rituals (such as thinking a good thought to cancel out a bad thought). Compulsions are usually carried out as a way of reducing the distress caused by obsessions. OCD takes many different forms and can range from mild to severe. When children are troubled by OCD they can experience very high levels of anxiety and distress and find that it can take up a lot of their time.

Some common obsessions are:

- Fears about dirt or contamination
- Worries about harm coming to yourself or others
- Unwanted sexual thoughts
- Thoughts about doing something forbidden or embarrassing
- Discomfort if things are not symmetrical or even
- Needing to tell, ask or confess
- Fears of losing important things

Some common compulsions are:

- Checking things over and over again
- Touching or tapping things
- Seeking reassurance
- Hoarding or collecting things that are useless
- Arranging things so that they are 'just right'
- Washing and cleaning
- Counting, repeating and re-doing things

The good news is that OCD can be successfully treated and recent evidence shows that the sooner it is tackled the better the treatment outcomes are likely to be. The recommended treatment for OCD by the Department of Health is a talking therapy called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). It is also recognised that some children may also benefit from treatment with medication from the group called selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (or SSRIs). It is clear

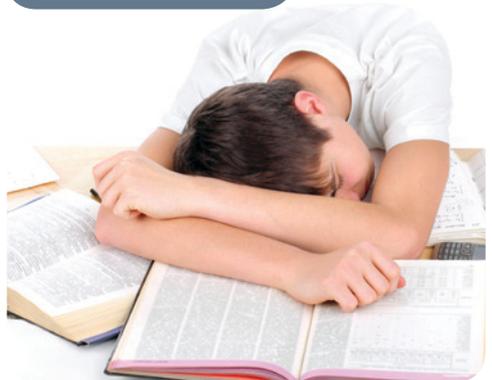
therefore that young people should not have to struggle with OCD without any support and treatment. OCD Action wants young people, their parents and their school to **take action now**.

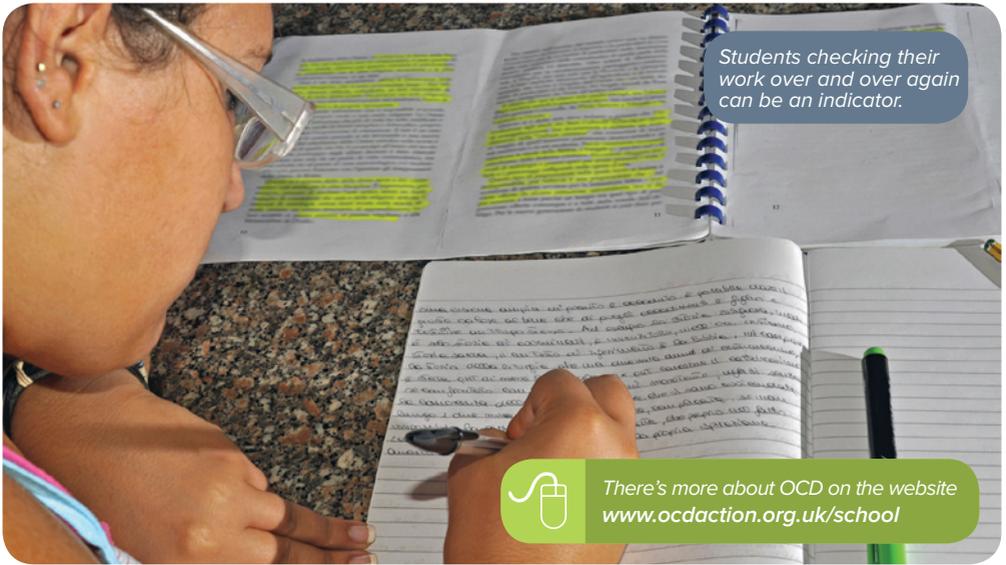
WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF OCD AT SCHOOL?

OCD can affect many areas of a young person's life, including school life. It is important to remember that OCD affects people in many ways however some of the signs that you may observe in school include:

- Poor attention and concentration due to distraction from unwanted thoughts or the need to perform rituals
- Extreme tiredness due to being up late at night doing rituals or the overall exhaustion caused by the constant battle with OCD
- Frequent or prolonged toilet visits due to completing cleaning rituals
- An inability to touch objects, materials or other people due to possible contamination fears
- Excessive questioning and need for reassurance
- Messy work due to having to repeat rituals such as rewriting or erasing words
- Repeated lateness as a result of being delayed by rituals
- Late handing in work due to being slowed down by obsessions and/or compulsions
- Arranging items on a desk, shelf or classroom so that objects are aligned

Tiredness due to rituals and overall exhaustion from OCD can be a classroom tell-tale sign.





Students checking their work over and over again can be an indicator.



There's more about OCD on the website www.ocdaction.org.uk/school

- Repetitive behaviours such as getting up and down from a desk or opening and closing the door
- Difficulties making decisions
- Low self esteem and difficulty with peer relationships
- Reduction in grades or decline in school performance

It may also be helpful to be aware that OCD can be associated with other disorders such as depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) and Tourette Syndrome.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

If you have observed some of the signs of OCD listed above, you will initially need to refer to your own school's guidelines and procedure regarding what to do if a pupil might have a mental health problem. As with most mental health problems teaching staff should maintain effective communication between the young person with OCD, their parents/carers and perhaps other agencies who may be involved in the young person's treatment. Working towards similar goals using consistent strategies to manage the OCD symptoms will be more effective for the young person both in school and at home. It is important to be mindful that for some young people

symptoms are much worse at home than at school. This can be a benefit, but teachers need to understand that children and their families may be suffering significantly from the OCD in the home. Teaching staff may need to be aware of the pressures the young person is experiencing and the potential impact they can have on school performance, even if no intervention is currently necessary in school.

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND OCD

Most children with OCD do not have any learning difficulties other than temporary problems they may experience while they have troublesome symptoms and a lot of anxiety. However, a few children with OCD can have specific learning difficulties (such as dyslexia) or more general learning difficulties (which means being behind for their age in all subjects). If these learning difficulties are present and not detected, children with OCD may not get the help and support they need, and get more and more anxious or stop going to school all together. Teachers need to look at the child's work (both present and past) and think carefully about this, if necessary involving the SENCO and/or the Educational psychologist, in discussion with parents. Some children with a learning difficulty and OCD need a Statement of Special Educational Needs.

TIPS FOR HELPING IN THE CLASSROOM

Below we have listed some advice and tips for helping young people who have OCD in the classroom setting:

- Effective communication between home and school is important— in the case of a young person with OCD, a ‘concerns book’ or an OCD diary or monitoring form (see Appendix 1) may be exchanged between parents and teachers so the child’s progress may be tracked and shared.
- If the child is having treatment, it is often helpful for the therapist to be in regular contact with teaching staff providing the young person and their family are happy with this.
- It is important that teaching staff do not become impatient with the young person or punish them for behaviour over which they have no control. At the same time it is important that children with OCD are helped to learn good behaviour and to obey rules in the same way as any child.
- If the young person becomes highly anxious in the classroom as a result of their OCD, it may be helpful to recognise this. Depending on what stage they are at in their treatment, options are to help them ‘sit out’ their anxiety, discuss it, or take a very short planned break.
- If the young person is struggling to meet deadlines on account of their OCD, you could consider extending the deadline. It may also be helpful to discuss the amount of time the young person is taking to complete assignments to ensure that it is not excessive. Detailed structuring of homework timetables can help.
- You could consider decreasing school workload both in lesson time and homework assignments. However, many children with OCD have great potential so it is important that they are also supported in achieving their goals.
- Consider how the young person’s OCD may impact on their performance in exams and what support they may find helpful during these times. You can allow extra time to complete the test, provide a different test-taking location, or even allow them to take the test orally.
- Be aware that some subjects may be more difficult for the young person depending on their worries, e.g. Maths might be difficult for a young person with worries about numbers and Biology for those with a fear of germs. At the same time it is important that children don’t miss out on exciting opportunities because of OCD, so they should be helped to ‘face their fears’.
- OCD can damage confidence and self-esteem. Help young people to focus on their strengths and areas in which they are confident.
- Be alert that OCD sufferers may be easy targets for bullying because of compulsive behaviours or lack of self-esteem.
- It may also be helpful to conduct classroom discussions about what OCD is and educate peers about the disorder, but be sensitive to the young person’s and parents’ views on this.

CONDUCTING CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS ABOUT OCD IS A GREAT WAY TO EDUCATE PEERS ABOUT THE DISORDER.

ocdaction

Suite 506-507,
Davina House,
137-149 Goswell Rd,
London, EC1V 7ET
T. 020 7253 2664
www.ocdaction.org.uk



WHERE ELSE CAN I FIND INFORMATION ABOUT OCD?

For more information on OCD and young people, refer to the

- OCD at School Guide for Young People
- OCD at School Guide for Parents
- www.ocdaction.org.uk/school



THIS LEAFLET IS PART OF OCD ACTION'S **OCD AT SCHOOL** PROJECT WRITTEN IN COLLABORATION WITH STAFF FROM THE NATIONAL AND SPECIALIST SERVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH OCD, MAUDSLEY HOSPITAL, LONDON. THE PROJECT IS FUNDED BY THE CITY BRIDGE TRUST.