

Facts about Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a type of anxiety disorder that can strike at any age but often begins in childhood. The illness afflicts 2.4 million Americans in all socioeconomic brackets. It overwhelms their lives, making them unable to work, socialize or enjoy family.

Symptoms

Obsessive-compulsive disorder can be mild or severe. Some people only have obsessions, which are repeated, intrusive, unwanted thoughts that cause distress and extreme anxiety. The anxiety they feel is not a normal anxious feeling, but is often so overwhelming and irrational that it causes obsessive thoughts.

Many times, people who have obsessions also experience compulsions. A compulsion is a ritual that a person goes through to reduce their anxiety. They can spend hours repeating involuntary, needless rituals to ease their anxiety or to protect themselves or loved ones from an unidentified, future tragedy. The constant repetition of rituals fills the day, making a normal routine impossible.

In addition to the painful rituals, people experience the anguish of knowing their compulsions are irrational. Obsessive-compulsive disorders trap people in a vicious cycle of constant rituals that they don't understand and can't explain. Among the compulsive rituals that may develop are: cleaning, repeating, completing, checking, being meticulous, hoarding, avoiding and slowness.

Possible Causes

Obsessive-compulsive disorders remain among the more baffling mental health concerns. However, experts have some ideas about its potential causes.

A **biological explanation** makes a connection between a normal threat response and the response made by an obsessive-compulsive. A biologically "normal" obsession is defined as a normal response to threat. We quickly become used to a threat after repeated exposure and eventually no longer feel threatened. People with an obsessive-compulsive disorder experience the anxious feeling of being threatened, but do not realize that the threat is causing these feelings. Thus, they do not become used to the threat and the anxious feelings persist. Over several months, this develops into an obsession that becomes a threat on its own.

In the **depression explanation**, some experts suspect that obsessive-compulsive illness could be closely linked with depression. Some people experience only obsessive-compulsive disorder, while some people experience both. Experts do not yet know whether the two illnesses occur at the same time or whether one is a complication of the other. The link between obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression is strengthened by the similarity in laboratory tests conducted on people with both conditions and on the similarity of emotional symptoms of both, including: guilt, indecisiveness, low self-esteem, anxiety and exhaustion.

Treatments

Behavior therapy is one of the most effective treatments. People are exposed to the situations that give rise to their anxiety and provoke their compulsive behavior. This works well for people whose compulsions focus on situations that can be repeated easily. Others, however, follow compulsive rituals because they fear catastrophic events that can't be recreated. Therapy for these people must rely more on imagination. Throughout behavior therapy, people follow guidelines or a "contract" on which the therapist and the person agree. Studies indicate that behavior therapy can effectively end compulsive behavior and significantly reduce the chances for relapse. But behavior therapy depends on the person's ability to keep his or her part of the contract.

Biological treatments can also relieve some symptoms. Unfortunately, behavior therapy is successful in only 25% of these cases. In an effort to meet the person's needs, research has focused on other potential treatments that may include medications. Research has shown that one antidepressant, clomipramine, can alleviate obsessions in some patients. Because this drug works while other similar medications do not, experts suspect clomipramine affects a very specific biological process in the brain. When they unravel the mystery, they also will know more about possible biochemical causes for this illness.

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