

Cognitive Restructuring for OCD

Liya Panayotova, Psychologist, liyap.com 8.6K reads

The time has come to highlight the importance of cognitive content, such as thoughts, ideas, beliefs and mental images, in the maintenance of OCD. Although, some experts focus on the behavioral aspect of OCD, which is in the form of compulsions, let's not forget that obsessive thoughts are the main reason why people engage in compulsive behaviors.

Before we get to ERP (exposure and response prevention), and other behavioral techniques which specifically target compulsions, let's make sure that your mind is in the right place. In other words, we are going to use a combination of cognitive and behavioral strategies, in order to lay the foundation for success. Let's see what cognitive restructuring is all about.



The banner features the Explorable logo at the top center, with the text "EXPLORABLE" in a large, bold, sans-serif font and "Quiz Time!" in a smaller, cursive font below it. Below the logo are three square images, each with a caption underneath. The first image shows a pair of red roller skates on a wooden deck, with the caption "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2". The second image shows a fan of colorful pens, with the caption "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2". The third image shows a Ferris wheel at sunset, with the caption "Quiz: Flags in Europe". To the right of these images is a link that says "See all quizzes =>".

Thoughts Shape Reality

Two men are asked to watch a documentary about insects. One thinks, "I don't like this show. Insects are creepy and gross", while the other one thinks, "Wow, this is really fascinating". Which one is right? As you might have guessed - neither. Each person interprets reality based on their own beliefs and preferences.

The same is true for obsessive thoughts and images. We all have them, but each person interprets them in his/her own way. Some people are completely overwhelmed by intrusive thoughts while others are not bothered by them and can easily move on.

Neurological Roots

What you need to know about the human brain is that the more we repeat something, the stronger our neural connections become. While this ability proves extremely useful in learning situations, it can also have detrimental effects on our well-being, especially when we focus our attention on certain thoughts and images. Basically, from a strictly neurological point of view, our obsessions and compulsions turn into a habit. For instance, we label germs as dangerous because that's the most accessible explanation. It's always easier to see things as you always did, rather than look for new alternatives.

Observe, but Don't Judge

Is it possible to simply observe our thoughts without trying to evaluate and label them as "good" or "bad"? The answer is most definitely YES. You've already learned about pausing and how this simple technique allows you to reflect on your thoughts and obsessions.

Acknowledging and accepting, without passing judgment on yourself, can prevent you from making hasty, biased interpretations. Sometimes, a thought is just a thought. It doesn't have to be a sign of danger or the ultimate truth. Your cognitions and the objective reality are two different elements. Although the human brain is an extraordinary machine, it still misfires from time to time. Not every thought that goes through your mind is valid or useful, and that's why it helps to acknowledge at your thoughts without judging them.

Remember, just because you believe in something, doesn't make it true.

Seek Real Evidence

The best way to keep irrational thoughts from interfering with your daily business is by seeking real tangible evidence. As you already know, you cannot always believe what your mind tells you to. One easy way to test the validity of your obsessive thoughts is by looking at statistics and other people's experiences, or seek an expert's view. For instance, if you're worried that dust can cause severe health issues, which may be an obsession, ask yourself this: How many people get sick or die because of dust? Do I know anybody who has fallen ill because of dust? Has my doctor told me that dust can be detrimental to my health?

It's Possible, but Is It Plausible?

Another good example is fear of catastrophe. We usually tend to estimate risk based on our own subjective opinion. Instead of letting ourselves be fooled by the intensity of our obsessive thoughts, why not consider the actual possibility of such occurrence. In theory, almost everything could happen, but it is crucial to ask ourselves how likely is it that it actually will. Remember this question and test your obsessive thoughts with it.

There are numerous ways of testing the validity of every obsession. You just have to be determined enough to put aside fear and anxiety for a moment and seek real evidence.