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Published on *Explorable.com* (<https://explorable.com>)

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Primary Symptoms

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Unlike many anxiety-related issues, obsessive-compulsive disorder has two main categories of symptoms: obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. There's also a third symptom that "mediates" the relationship between obsessions and compulsions – anxiety.

We don't need to go into further details here because we've already discussed how anxiety maintains the vicious circle of OCD. However, anxiety can be considered both a cause and a symptom of OCD. On the one hand it triggers compulsive behaviors and on the other - it keeps you under constant pressure which, in time, leads to a decrease in the quality of life.

In order to fully understand the nature of this condition, we need to explore these 3 main symptoms and discover how each one diminishes our ability to perform daily tasks.

The banner features the Explorable logo and the text "Quiz Time!". Below this are three quiz cards:

- Card 1: Image of roller skates on a wooden deck. Text: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2".
- Card 2: Image of a fan of colored pencils. Text: "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2".
- Card 3: Image of a Ferris wheel at sunset. Text: "Quiz: Flags in Europe".

At the bottom right of the banner is a link: "See all quizzes =>".

1. Obsessions

There are a few key traits, characteristic of obsessions, which make those thoughts so challenging to manage.

They Are Intrusive

Although we are fully aware of the fact that our obsessions are completely meaningless and irrational, these intrusive thoughts or images continuously disrupt our daily activities. It's

virtually impossible to focus on writing an e-mail when your mind keeps telling you: “There are millions of bacteria crawling all over the keyboard, right under your fingertips.”

They Are Repetitive

Obsessions are also repetitive, meaning that they’ll appear over and over again, until you do something about it. It seems like they’re simply impossible to ignore. The more you try to run from your obsession, the stronger it grows. Since you have probably been running for a long time now, perhaps you need a new strategy. Later on, you will learn how to face an obsession and eliminate it once and for all.

They Are Overwhelming

Last but not least, obsessions are overwhelming. No matter how much of a hurry you are in, there’s always time to check your windows, stove and home appliances, especially when the image of a catastrophe keeps popping into your mind. The sensation caused by an obsessive thought or image seems too intense to ignore. It feels like your entire world depends on what that obsession “tells” you.

If a certain thought or image is intrusive, repetitive and overwhelming, it means that you’re faced with an obsession.

2. Compulsions

Let’s start by saying that not all compulsions manifest as visible behaviors. For instance, if a person is obsessed by an idea, their compulsions might take the form of thoughts aimed at reducing anxiety.

Let’s take a look at the following scenario:

Suppose you are obsessed by morality and for some reason, you think you have violated a moral law. In order to eliminate the anxiety caused by your obsession (“I’ve made a mistake”), you engage in self-blame and criticism (“I’m a bad person”; “I must be punished in some way”). These are called mental compulsions and are usually displayed by religious fanatics who recite prayers (over and over again) or, in some extreme cases, engage in self-torture. Note that we’re talking about religious fanaticism here. The large majority of people who practice religion don’t necessarily display symptoms of OCD.

Routine, Taken to Extremes

However, most people who suffer from OCD will experience compulsive behaviors, rather than mental ones. Compulsions are just normal behaviors taken to the extreme. For example, handwashing is considered a routine, but not when you do it 30 times a day. Same goes for cleaning, hoarding, shopping, checking, repeating, ordering, counting, arranging and many more. You don’t always need an expert to tell you that a certain behavior is done in a compulsive manner. In fact, most people who experience OCD are fully aware of the gravity of the situation. They simply don’t know how to stop.

Since one completes the other, compulsions are just as repetitive, overwhelming and

uncontrollable as obsessions.

3. Anxiety

Anxiety binds the relationship between obsessions and compulsions. Without anxiety, obsessions are just random thoughts that appear and disappear, without making their presence known. Each time an obsessive thought or image pops into your head, anxiety will immediately follow. Earlier, we said that obsessions are repetitive. This means that the person experiencing OCD, will constantly feel the nasty presence of anxiety.

If you feel anxious about everyone and everything, take a moment to reflect on what truly hides behind your daily fears and anxieties. What triggers this constant worrying that drains your energy, leaving you frustrated and lost in pointless rituals? Perhaps it's a thought, or more, being repeated on a loop, until your attention has been attracted to the point where you are unable to look away.

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