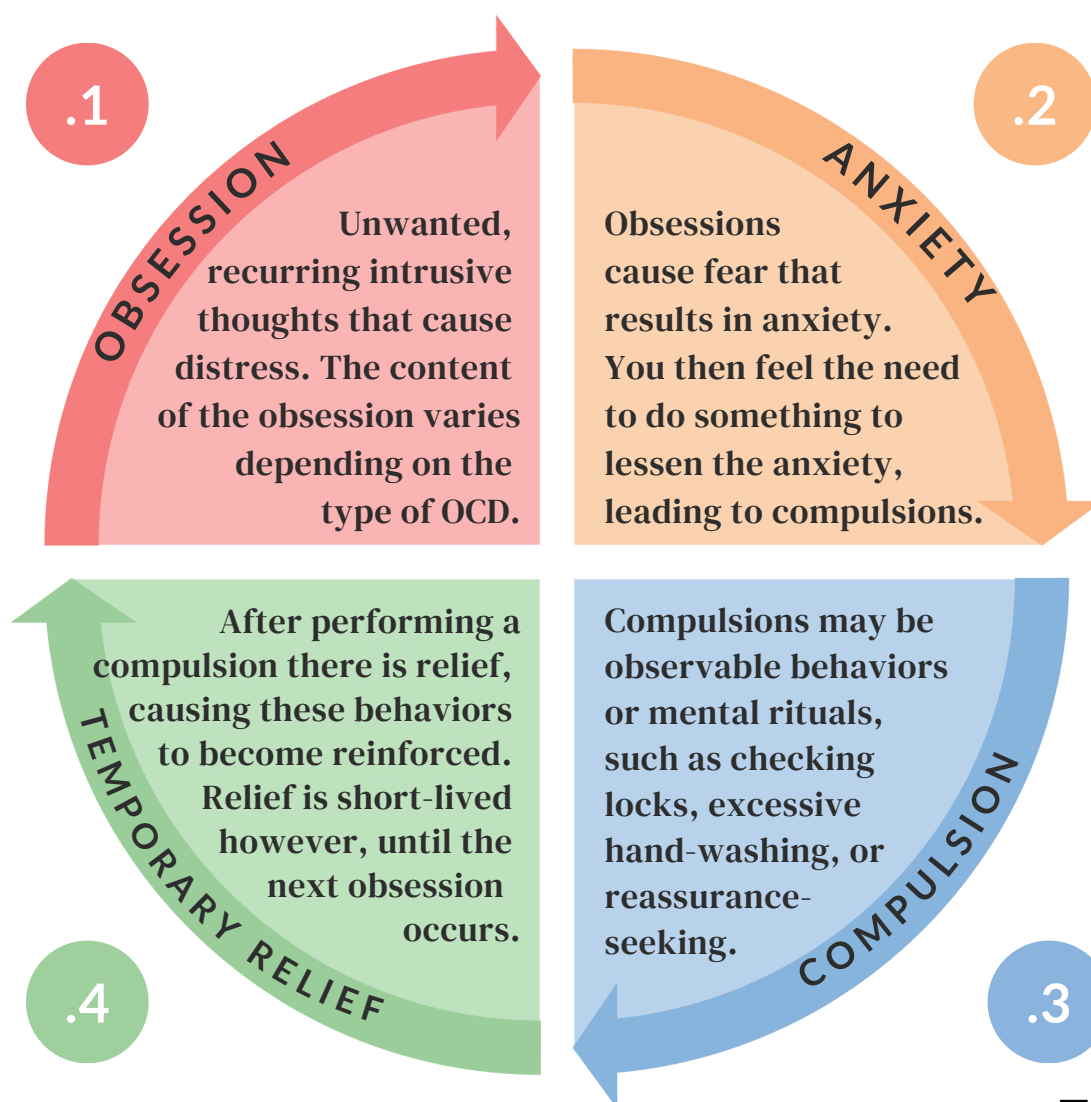


# The Cycle of OCD

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) often follows a repetitive cycle called the "cycle of OCD." This cycle begins with a trigger, which can be either internal (like emotions, memories, or sensory experiences) or external (such as social situations, specific places, or disruptions in routine).

Once a trigger occurs, the first phase of the cycle starts with obsessions. Obsessions are intrusive, distressing thoughts that create anxiety or discomfort. To relieve this distress, someone with OCD moves into the next phase: compulsions. Compulsions are actions or mental rituals aimed at reducing the uncomfortable feelings caused by obsessions. After completing these compulsions, there's a sense of temporary relief—until the next trigger arises, restarting the cycle.

Understanding how this cycle plays out in your own experience  
is a powerful first step toward breaking free from it.



*\*This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*



# The Cycle of OCD

## PART 1: Identify Your Triggers

Triggers can arise in many areas of your life. Below, list your OCD triggers in each area. Triggers typically provoke obsessions, defined as unwanted and recurring intrusive thoughts that cause anxiety or distress.

### Home

*Examples: clutter in the home, disruption in routine*

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### Work/School

*Examples: pressure with deadlines, fear of poor performance*

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### Social Situations

*Examples: being in close proximity to others, social interactions*

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### Relationships

*Examples: concern for safety of loved ones or significant others*

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Obsessions are unwanted and distressing ideas, thoughts, or impulses. They are often experienced as intrusive thoughts and are typically brought on by triggers such as the ones you listed in the above worksheet. Below, list the obsessions that you notice come up for you in order from most distressing to least distressing.

## Most Distress

## Least Distress

**Scan or [click here](#) to learn more  
about the cycle of OCD:**



# The Cycle of OCD

## PART 3: Identify the Emotions Related to Your Obsessions

Check off the emotions that you commonly feel in response to obsessions that you experience.

<input type="checkbox"/> Anxious	<input type="checkbox"/> Insecure	<input type="checkbox"/> Indifferent
<input type="checkbox"/> Sad	<input type="checkbox"/> Overwhelmed	<input type="checkbox"/> Pressured
<input type="checkbox"/> Disgusted	<input type="checkbox"/> Inferior	<input type="checkbox"/> Exposed
<input type="checkbox"/> Guilty	<input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated	<input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate
<input type="checkbox"/> Worried	<input type="checkbox"/> Critical	<input type="checkbox"/> Scared
<input type="checkbox"/> Confused	<input type="checkbox"/> Annoyed	<input type="checkbox"/> Lonely
<input type="checkbox"/> Isolated	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn	<input type="checkbox"/> Nervous
<input type="checkbox"/> Powerless	<input type="checkbox"/> Resentful	<input type="checkbox"/> Disdain
<input type="checkbox"/> Ashamed	<input type="checkbox"/> Furious	<input type="checkbox"/> Violated
<input type="checkbox"/> Vulnerable	<input type="checkbox"/> Disappointed	<input type="checkbox"/> Startled
<input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed	<input type="checkbox"/> Perplexed	<input type="checkbox"/> Stressed
<input type="checkbox"/> Frightened	<input type="checkbox"/> Curious	<input type="checkbox"/> Bitter
<input type="checkbox"/> Helpless	<input type="checkbox"/> Content	<input type="checkbox"/> Mad

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# The Cycle of OCD

## PART 4: Understanding the Compulsions

Compulsions are repeated behaviors that an individual feels driven to perform. They are intended to reduce anxiety or prevent a feared outcome from happening. Compulsions can be observable behaviors and actions or they can be mental rituals. Below, write down compulsions that you notice yourself performing. Examples have been provided to help you start; check off any of the example compulsions you find yourself engaging in and add your own to the list.

### Cleaning Compulsions

☐

Washing hands in a ritualized or excessive way

☐

Excessively cleaning faucets, floors, counters

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### Checking Compulsions

☐

Repeatedly checking that the door is locked

☐

Checking that you did not harm someone without knowing it

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### Repeating Compulsions

☐

Spending excessive amount of time rewriting or rereading things

☐

Repeating routine activities like turning off a light switch, walking in and out of a door

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### Other Compulsions

☐

Counting objects such as floor or ceiling tiles

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Spending excessive time straightening papers, pens, books, etc.

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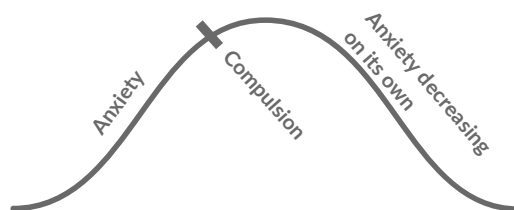
# The Cycle of OCD

## PART 5: How to Break the Cycle

Compulsions typically provide temporary, short-term relief to distress from obsessions until the next time a trigger is encountered. Then, the cycle starts all over again. To gain long-term relief instead of short-term relief, the cycle of OCD needs to be broken.

Building your awareness by identifying obsessions and compulsions, like you have in the above worksheets, is a great first step to breaking the cycle of OCD! Below are ideas for how to get out of this OCD cycle and find long-term relief.

A crucial step in breaking the cycle of OCD is learning to sit with anxious feelings without engaging in compulsive behavior. Compulsions maintain this cycle by giving short-term relief to distress and over time your brain begins to rely on compulsions as the way to reduce these feelings, rather than sitting through this distress without a compulsion.



When you ride out the wave of anxiety without participating in a compulsion, the urges to engage in compulsions will decrease. It may feel overwhelming at first, but with practice it can become easier. Working with a therapist who specializes in OCD can help you through this process, and teach you coping skills to work through anxiety without performing compulsions.

### Coping Strategies to Reduce Anxiety

To sit with anxiety without participating in a compulsive behavior, it can be helpful to learn new coping strategies. Below are examples of these strategies; circle which ones you would like to try:

- Take a few deep breaths. Try to inhale through your nose for a count of 4, hold your breath for a count of 4, and then exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of 6. Repeat as many times as you need to feel calmer.
- Implement progressive muscle relaxation by slowly tensing each muscle group for 5 seconds, then releasing. This can help ease any tension you may feel in your body.
- Incorporate mindfulness of your body sensations by engaging in a body scan. Spend between 15-30 seconds scanning each part of your body, starting with your feet and moving up through the body and noticing any physical sensations that stand out to you.
- Ground yourself with the 5-4-3-2-1 method. Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

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# Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

## You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



**325+**  
Companies Reviewed



**3,625+**  
Hours of Firsthand Experience



**1,545+**  
Data Points Analyzed



### [Best Online Therapy for OCD](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

### [Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



### [Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

### [Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.

