

OCD

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Arkesie Self Help Guide Series

Self-Help

- ☐ Do you often worry that you have forgotten to do something, or left something half-completed?
- ☐ Have you developed a fear of germs or contamination?
- ☐ Do you spend excessive amounts of time double-checking that something has been completed properly? (Locking the door, or making sure that the gas is off?)
- ☐ Have you found that you can become easily stressed if objects are not in their 'correct place'?
- ☐ Do you find yourself worrying that if you don't do certain things then something negative will happen?
- ☐ Have you felt responsible for something negative happening and subsequently go to great lengths to avoid that from happening again?

If any of these points apply to you then you might be experiencing obsessions and compulsions. If so, this *Self-Help Guide* aims to provide you with the tools and strategies to harness these symptoms.

You will learn how to:

- ☐ Recognise some of the common signs of obsessive and compulsive behaviours.
- ☐ What causes some of the symptoms that you are experiencing
- ☐ Use affective strategies to reduce obsession and compulsions.

Symptoms of Obsessions and Compulsions

Now that you have established that you may be suffering from obsessions and compulsions, it might be useful to check out some of the common feelings, physical symptoms, thoughts and behavioural patterns below. Please tick the boxes of the ones that apply to you.

Feelings

Irritated or frustrated	
Stressed	
Embarrassed/ Ashamed	
Dirty	
Intense Anxiety	

Physical Symptoms

Dizziness/ Nausea	
Muscle Pain	
Racing heart-beat	
Sweating	
Feeling the need to get up and move around	

Thoughts

I am sure that I left the iron/heater/oven on	
If I don't do this then something bad will happen	
I am covered in dirt and germs	
I will get sick	
I need symmetry/orderliness	

Behavioural Patterns

Cleaning things and washing hands excessively	
Double-checking if appliances are switched off or doors are closed	
Say prayers or phrases to avoid disasters from happening	
Avoid touching things that you think are contaminated	
Ask other people to double things for you in case you have missed them or need to be reminded (e.g., “Did I turn off the gas?”)	
Avoid going to places that you think will make you feel stressed	

If you have found that you have ticked a number of these symptoms, you may be experiencing obsessions and compulsions. Don't panic, lots of people suffer from this as it is fairly common. This *Self-Help Guide* aims to provide you with a number of highly effective strategies that will help you manage the obsessions and compulsions that you are suffering from.

Obsessions and Compulsions Explained

It is within our nature to act cautiously around what we perceive to be danger. For centuries, superstition has manifested itself into the forms of; breaking a mirror brings you bad luck for seven years, numbers such as 13, don't walk under a ladder (it will bring you bad luck) and even black cats! Did you ever stop yourself from stepping on the cracks on the pavement as a child? These are all normal parts of being a human being. Obsessions and compulsions differ from superstitions because it is more extreme in its form. When we start to experience those symptoms for longer periods of time, we can safely assume we are struggling with obsession and compulsions.

OCD can be categorised into three sections:

- Obsessions – Intrusive, stressful, unhelpful thoughts or images that repeats itself in your mind
- Emotion – These are some of the feelings that we discussed earlier (e.g., anxiety, stress, frustrations)
- Compulsions – Repetitive behaviour that is formed as a consequence of obsessive thoughts and feelings of anxiety. The compulsive element often acts as a form of relief from those constraining feelings of distress. However, if those initial feelings of worry are not adequately addressed, they soon return and the vicious cycle of OCD symptoms that perpetuate themselves.

Obsessions

Obsessions are persistent, unwanted thoughts that linger until relieved by a compulsive action. The thoughts can feel haunting and are repetitive in nature, which can make it very difficult to focus on anything else.

Some common obsessions are:

- ☐ Worry about harming yourself or other people by mistake – e.g., you may worry about driving your child's friend to school, in case you have a car accident and harm them.
- ☐ Fear of being infected by something caused by dirtiness or uncleanliness.
- ☐ Forgetting to complete something (e.g., turning off the iron)
- ☐ Worry about doing something that is deemed socially unacceptable (e.g., swearing in front of your boss)
- ☐ A desire for things to be orderly/ need for symmetry (e.g., you may feel the need to line all your pencils with measured distances apart)

Some people who suffer from OCD can experience distressing obsessive thoughts of violence or sexual in nature. These can be scary, but it is important to remember that these are just thoughts and it does not necessarily mean that you are going to act on them.

These obsessive thoughts can spark those feelings of stress and anxiety which can then trigger those unhelpful compulsions. Compulsions can manifest in rituals which may have to alleviate those distressing emotions. Sometimes we use those compulsions to reduce or even prevent those feelings from happening. The direct connection between the compulsion and the obsessive thought can lead us to behave in ways that are excessive in nature. For example; a person who might fear being burgled may lock their door continuously, counting out loud each time. This compulsion will help that person feel that they have prevented not only the act of the burglary from happening, but also their own feelings of anxiety too. In reality, most sufferers of obsessions and compulsions are aware that their own rituals are irrational, however they struggle to stop acting out the repetitive behaviour “in case” something happens as a consequence of not doing it.

Common types of compulsive behaviour:

- ☐ Repeatedly washing your hands for fear of contamination or infection
- ☐ Repeatedly checking that tasks have been completed properly
- ☐ Checking with other people that tasks have been completed for reassurance
- ☐ Counting turns of locks, knocks or physical items
- ☐ Repeating words or phrases in your head/ praying
- ☐ Avoiding places, situations or objects that you believe will trigger those obsessive thoughts or feelings

It is important to remember that compulsive behaviour may not be overtly obvious to other people. Sometimes relief-seeking rituals could be as passive as counting in your head,

repeating words or phrases such as prayers or associating symbols with consequences too.

Also, obsessions and compulsions do not have to occur simultaneously, although they often act in partnership.

What Fuels our Obsessions and Compulsions?

Compulsive Rituals

Those of us who suffer from obsessions and compulsions can become stressed when those initial worries and fears surface. As a result, we then try to neutralise them by engaging in behavioural patterns (rituals) that we believe will rid us of the feeling of worry. For example, if we believe that being contaminated by something will cause us anguish, then washing our hands regularly may be a ritual we use to help us. The truth is that although ritualistic behaviours may provide instantaneous relief, this is only ever temporary as it is part of a vicious cycle of symptoms that do not provide long-term relief. If the initial problem has not been challenged effectively then it is likely that the unhelpful thought will then return again and the ritual will continue to act as a response mechanism.

How are obsessions and compulsions triggered?

Our Thoughts

Our thoughts can act as kindling to obsessive tendencies. It is common for people who suffer from obsessive thoughts and compulsions to overestimate the possibility of something bad happening (e.g., a fire occurring at their house). Due to this initial worry, they might compulsively turn the gas off as well as all the light switches in the house before they leave to go to work. They may do this repeatedly and count each time so that they are sure that they have completed it and that the negative obsessive thought then goes away. Furthermore, it is common for those people to then blame themselves if something negative does happen. For example, if there is a fire at work, they will believe it is because they didn't turn a light switch off when they left the room. As a consequence, the compulsive behaviour may worsen into believing that acting out rituals will keep others (as well as themselves) safe from potential harm. It is important to remember that it is natural to worry about harmful situations, however if this is becoming excessive then we need to remember that these thoughts are not as significant as they seem to be.

It is also common for some people to believe that their negative thoughts are just as bad as negative actions. For example, thinking about burning down a shop is just as bad as actually committing the act of arson. Furthermore, some people feel that there is something wrong with them and fear these intrusive thoughts. This can often perpetuate the cycle of compulsions that act as a way of relieving them of their difficult emotions.

Past/ Current Events

Sometimes traumatic events that have occurred the past can lead us to behave in ways which can be irrational. Obsessions and compulsions can develop after we have suffered from a period of stress or unhappiness. This could be due to abuse, bullying, financial issues, a bereavement or stress in general.

Genetic reasons

Research suggests that if someone in your immediate family has experienced symptoms of obsessions and compulsions, then you are more likely to experience them too.

These are a few of the reasons why obsessions and compulsions might manifest in the first place. It is important to consider that as we are all unique human beings, it is likely that you

will be experiencing a combination of these points, rather than an isolated one.

What fuels our obsessions and compulsions?

Compulsions/ Rituals

When we experience those negative or unhelpful thoughts, we can become upset and emotional. In an attempt to rid ourselves of these unwanted feelings, we can participate in rituals that temporarily relieve us of those symptoms. For example; turning the gas off and then checking three times before leaving the house.

Although it is understandable to want to take (what we feel to be) the necessary precautions when ensuring that we are kept safe, it becomes unnecessary to do so when the compulsion becomes repetitive or excessive.

These compulsions offer temporary relief to those obsessive thoughts; however, it is important to stress that it is merely a temporary relief. If the unhelpful thought has not been challenged effectively, then we tend to rely on these repetitive rituals to help us relax again. This can create an unhelpful pattern of behaviour that can be exhausting, repetitive and cyclical in its nature.

Sometimes we genuinely believe that if we do not take the necessary precautions (in this case – compulsive rituals) that our worst fears will come true. This can make it very difficult to break away from acting on those compulsive urges. Furthermore, it is also common to believe that because we have performed those rituals so often, we have subsequently protected ourselves to date. This can often warrant those “what if” questions again.

For example:

What if I stop washing my hands? I will catch an infection and become ill. I must continue to wash them as I have protected myself from contamination by doing this so far.

Avoiding scenarios

Understandably, many of us try to avoid scenarios that might fuel those initial unhelpful thoughts. They can often be stressful and upsetting, so in avoiding them we are therefore avoiding the compulsions too.

For example;

You might avoid touching door handles in public toilets, if you are worried about the contamination of germs.

Due to the predictable anxiety that you know that you will face by going into a public restroom, you therefore avoid this at all cost. As a result, the fear of contamination and germs still remains.

Barricading Out Negative Thoughts

In a similar way to avoiding potentially distressing scenarios, we might also block out negative or unhelpful thoughts. Again, this is also understandable as those thoughts can slow us down and prevent us from completing day-to-day activities such as; cooking, leaving the house and performing our duties at work.

For example;

You might worry that you will have a car accident if you give your colleague a lift home from work.

As we talked about earlier, some of us worry that our thoughts directly impact our actions. By blocking out those negative thoughts, we may feel that we are reducing the likelihood of that thought becoming a reality. However, what we do know is that the more we think about not doing something, the more difficult it is not to think about it too. Subsequently, we end up concentrating too much on that unhelpful thought, which is what can turn it into more of an obsession. Can you see how in doing this, we are perpetuating a vicious cycle of obsessions and compulsions?

Thinking Styles

Often the way in which we perceive a threat can be the reason why it is becoming more of an obsessive thought. By believing that a danger will occur if we do not perform those rituals correctly, we are entering into that same cycle of unhelpful compulsions in a bid to protect ourselves. This can make it difficult to break the cycle as we are worried that we will be held responsible for any danger if we do not act on the compulsion.

For example;

If I do not turn the switch for the iron off and then check three times, then it is likely that I would have left it on. If it is left on, a fire will start and then someone will be hurt and it will be my fault.

As mentioned before, it is important to remember that it is unlikely that just one of these factors is what is causing those obsessions and compulsions that you are experiencing. It is more likely that it is due to a combination of these theories.

Strategies to help us manage and overcome our obsessions and compulsions

This *Self-Help Guide* details a number of highly effective strategies that will help you overcome those obsessions and compulsions that have been plaguing you.

These are:

- ☐ Find ways to challenge unhelpful thoughts (obsessions) without turning to compulsions as a form of relief.
- ☐ Helpful hints on how to reduce those rituals (compulsions).
- ☐ Learn how to challenge those unhelpful thoughts and create a more balanced approach to your thinking.

It is important to note that everyone learns at their own pace. The strategies that are listed in this guide will help you if you follow them carefully and allow yourself time and patience to try them out consistently. Feel free to return back to any stage and repeat the task until you are confident that you have harnessed the skill to use that strategy regularly.

Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

As we have already discussed, it is common for people who experience those anxious thoughts to engage in some ritualistic behavioural patterns that help to temporarily relieve the symptoms of obsessions and compulsions. While this can provide temporary relief, it is not helpful in the long term as the problem still remains. Unfortunately, this creates a pattern of behaviours that can worsen over time. We can then become more dependent on acting on those compulsions in order to find that instantaneous relief in moments of stress. This pattern of behaviour can be time-consuming and exhausting, so it is important to find ways to challenge those thoughts and break the cycle.

For example:


Checking that the gas is not left on three times before you leave the house.

If you challenge the compulsion to check the gas three times and just check it once before going you are beginning to confront your fear of a gas leak happening. By consciously choosing not to check the gas at all before they leave the house and trust the fact that you switched it off after you last used it, you are avoiding relying on the unhelpful relief cycle (cycle of compulsive behaviour).


It can be scary to even consider not participating in these rituals, however it is important to begin the process gradually. It has been proven through research that if we face our fears for long enough (without indulging in the tempting relief ritual) then our anxiety will begin to reduce down. In a way, this is naturalising ourselves to the situation and familiarising ourselves with the reality of the “what if” questions that we so frequently ask. Without any false pretences, this can be difficult to start at first because our anxiety levels will be at a high level, however it usually takes about 30 minutes for the feelings of worry to go away. Over time, you will start to notice that this time will begin to decrease to almost no anxiety at all - that is, if this strategy is applied regularly and consistently. You will begin to notice that those scenarios that you were once avoiding altogether are now so much easier to face. This will help you build-up self-confidence and assurance that the dangers that you fear may not be as much of a reality as you initially thought.


For example:


Someone who has a fear of being burgled checked their doors and windows were locked four times before leaving the house.

 Task – Do not check the windows before leaving the house – Anxiety levels rise and the obsessive thoughts become more persistent.

 Resisting the urge to check the windows – anxiety levels start to reduce.

 Confidence surges each time and they have now realised that when they return home that the windows are still shut and that the house hasn't been burgled.

 Soon they will be able to leave the house before thinking about checking the windows at all. There is little to no anxiety surrounding this once obsessive thought.

 Once completed, they can now start the gradual process of refraining from repeatedly checking that the doors have been locked too.

Please remember to give yourself credit for actually starting to use this approach. It can be a terrifying prospect for some people to refrain from participating in that compulsive relief strategy in the first place. Remind yourself that it will get easier, every time that you commit to challenging that unhelpful thought by not reacting through a compulsion action.

5 Step Strategy

Step 1: Forming ideas on how to challenge those unhelpful thoughts

As mentioned before, it can be scary to consider challenging an obsessive thought, let alone refrain from acting on it through a relief-seeking ritual. One way of beginning the process is to plan a gradual approach to confronting each obsession. The all-or-nothing way can be a little harsh and make the process to managing your obsessions even harder. Ensure that you are approaching the exposure to your fear with small steps. This is a much better way of maintaining that you can harness your anxieties affectively.

A good start is to list down scenarios that fuel your obsessions and compulsions. I might help to put the one that causes the least stress first. Remember that your confidence will grow after some time of applying the steps affectively, so try to put the hardest and most distressing fear at the bottom. That's right, save the best to the end!

For example:

Easiest to hardest (Hierarchy of Fears)	Predicted feeling (anxiety level)
Switch off the kettle without checking it again	
Switch off the cooker without checking it again	
Close the windows once without checking it before you leave the house	
Lock the doors once without checking it before you leave the house	
Shut the garden gate once without checking it before you leave the house	

You can choose to rank it in order at this stage, but if not, don't worry. What is important is that you write down all the things that are causing you distress. It might help to think about

what things make you feel scared or worried, things or situations that you might be avoiding, scenarios that instigate that urge to perform a relief-seeking ritual (turn the lock and count three times).

If your worries cause more than one ritualistic behaviour then feel free to make two lists, for example you might be worried about contamination and germs as well as worry about hurting a loved one by accident. It is important that you can identify all the issues so that you do not have anything left-over to challenge.

Step 2: Ranking your fears

Now that you have completed your hierarchy, you can now add in a level for each situation. This indicates how much anxiety you believe that you feel when faced with each scenario. This way you can visualise your worries and break them down into a clear hierarchy.

For example:

Easiest to hardest (Hierarchy of Fears)	Predicted feeling (anxiety levels)
Switch off the kettle without checking it again	45
Switch off the cooker without checking it again	55
Close the windows once without checking it before you leave the house	75
Lock the doors once without checking it before you leave the house	90
Shut the garden gate once without checking it before you leave the house	100

Step 3: Challenging your first fear

Once you have ranked how anxious each situation makes you feel, you can now take the first step to challenge the least anxiety-provoking fear. Even though it can be scary at first, it is really important that you take this first step. Remember to give yourself time to confront your fear and do not feel rushed. Remember that it will get easier every time you commit to exposing yourself to what is making you feel anxious. It is important to refrain from performing any of the relief-seeking rituals that you have acted on in the past. It is in the past and is behind you.

Try to:

- ☐ Avoid relying on those relief-seeking rituals as you always have done before.

- ☐ Remind yourself that your anxiety will spike at first but every time you commit to confronting a fear.
- ☐ Try to remember that anxiety comes as a natural part of confronting those obsessions. It will decrease over time and things will get easier, if you make sure you are keeping to the steps.
- ☐ Try to keep pushing through the situation, even if you are struggling with feelings of anxiety. If you can't complete the task, that's okay, stop when your anxiety has decreased by at least half of its initial amount. You have still achieved something.
- ☐ Do not over-burden yourself by trying to remove too many rituals at once. Draw up a list and prioritise the easiest ritual to overcome first. Once you have achieved overcoming that one, then consider challenging the next one. This is a process and you have to be prepared for the fact that you might not see visible changes straight away. Be patient with yourself and keep trying.

Step 4 – Repetition

Interestingly, we have talked a lot about how frustrating repetition can be when suffering from the symptoms of obsessions and compulsions. However, in this case, it is crucial that you repeat the process of exposing yourself to those fears. It can feel daunting to do so, however it will get easier for you if you keep repeating it. Try to set a goal of exposing yourself to your lowest scoring worry on the hierarchy list every single day until you have overcome it. Then continue this with the next one on the list until you gain more confidence. The more frequently that you expose yourself to your fears, the quicker you will manage or overcome them. The choice is yours!

Step 5 – Going through your list by step

As you slowly overcome and manage each step, remember to continue up the list until you reach the highest scoring fear. Once you have reached the top, you will notice a significant change in your reactions to confronting what has been making you feel anxious for all this time. Try to acknowledge the progress you have made and consider how far you have come to even be the position to begin managing what you are experiencing. As you move up the list of your obsessions and compulsions, think about what you have achieved so far.

Helpful hints

- ☐ If you find that you have tried, but are really struggling to carry on or see the exposure task through then don't worry, this will happen occasionally. Try to give yourself the break that your mind is asking for and then attempt to do the task again as soon as you feel that you can.
- ☐ Sometimes a small step between tasks on the exposure hierarchy list can feel like a big jump. If this is the case, you can re-evaluate your steps and slot in a new one as a bridge between different stages too. This will help you build confidence as the tasks will become easier for you to achieve.

Managing those rituals and reducing the compulsions

As we have talked about before, it is important to try to break the vicious cycle of obsessions and compulsions.

These could be:

- ☐ Physically moving in a specific way
- ☐ Activities such as turning off switches, closing doors and checking the safety of objects.
- ☐ Performing activities in a symmetrical way - walking on specific bricks on the pavement, turning objects to show the labels, dressing in a symmetrical way.
- ☐ Repeatedly blinking, swallowing or moving in a specific way
- ☐ Counting or tapping
- ☐ Picturing your loved ones as being alive and well and panicking if you haven't visualised them correctly.

It is important to try to remove these rituals from our life in order to understand the reality of the situation. Otherwise, it is easy to believe that by not participating in these rituals a catastrophe will happen. Even though it may be hard to take that first step to expose yourself to your fears, it will get easier each time.

Here are some hints that might help you manage in those moments of distress when exposing yourself to a what you perceive to be a threat:

- Try to be aware of when you might start to consider avoiding an activity that makes you worry and perform a relief-seeking ritual. If you are avoiding the scenario, you are effectively avoiding a chance to confront it and heal from the cause of your fear.
- Even though it can be easier if you ask for help from a loved one to complete the task, it is not going to help us overcome our own worries if we do not face them ourselves. For example, you might ask a friend to lock the house for you when you leave, so that you do not have to worry about it or even participate in a potential ritual.
- If you are finding it difficult to remove a relief seeking ritual then it might help to try to approach the step differently. Instead, you could attempt to cut down the time that you spend doing it. For example, instead of taking 10 seconds to wash your hands when you are afraid of contamination of germs, do it in 8 seconds and then 6 seconds and so on. Or, if you normally have to check the gas switch 3 times before leaving the house, cut this down to 2 times and then 1 until you don't have to check it anymore.
- Similarly, try to extend the time between completing the relief-seeking ritual from the time in which the anxiety rises. If you are worrying about having locked the door, give yourself 2 minutes before you actually go and check again. Then extend the period of time for longer and longer. This will help you manage those anxious feelings.
- Only focus on removing one ritual at a time. Try to be patient if you want this to pay-off in the long run.

Compulsions – Explained

One of the most obvious aspects to compulsions is that they can be acted-out as a physical behaviour that provides temporary relief to distressed caused by obsessive thoughts. The other side to compulsions is that some are thoughts and not necessarily a physical behaviour at all. Some of us who suffer from compulsive thoughts may think that if two can visualise our loved ones as being healthy and happy, then they are will be free from harm. However, if we forget to do this, or visualise them in a negative way, then we may worry that our family are doomed to a disaster occurring. It is important to challenge these thoughts, just as if you would confront any physical relief-ritual such as turning off a light switch.

Furthermore, some people try to block those thoughts altogether as they believe that if the unhelpful thoughts about their loved ones are not even entering into their mind, then surely nothing bad will happen to them. Unfortunately, this can make those unhelpful obsessions even worse. Through focusing our energy on deterring them, we are in fact obsessing over them and allowing them to worm their way back into our thoughts. You know when you drive past something unsightly (e.g., roadkill) and someone tells you not to look. What do you do? We look, every single time!

Through identifying that these thoughts are unhelpful and actually another form of compulsive behaviour, we can remind ourselves that they are only thoughts and not based on any concrete evidence. If you associate any importance to the thoughts, then you are allowing it to build up and dominate your thinking. If you take the outlook that these thoughts are only

thoughts and are harmless, then you are not letting them grow any further than they already have. If you resist them and detach any importance to them, then you will notice how they will start to slowly disappear.

Confronting Negative Thoughts

We have talked about how the way in which we think can have a direct effect on our obsessions and compulsions. If we think negatively about ourselves and our own ability to manage the obsessions and compulsions, then it is going to be much harder to overcome them. It is important to remind ourselves that these are just thoughts and not necessarily based on any concrete evidence. Although thoughts are fluid and mostly occur outside our own control, we can at least recognise when we are experiencing them. Once we can Through doing this, it will be easier to decide whether they are just assumption or actually based on evidence.

The next section of this *Self-Help Guide* will help you identify when you are thinking about something in an unrealistic or unhelpful way. By recognising some of the most common types of unhelpful thoughts, you will be able to recognise when you are doing it too. Once you have identified them, you will start to see things in a different and more realistic way. This will have a direct impact on what is triggering your obsessions and rituals.

Patterns of negative thoughts

There are many different ways in which those unhelpful thoughts can form patterns. Here are some of the most common types of unhelpful thoughts that many people who experience symptoms of obsession and compulsion have:

An overwhelming feeling of responsibility for others

More often than not, those of us who suffer from obsessions and compulsions feel that we will be held responsible for something awful happening to ourselves, other people or inanimate objects.

For example:

- We may worry that other people will blame them if someone burgled their house because they did not lock the house properly.

Always considering the possibility of catastrophic danger occurring

Many people who suffer from the symptoms of obsession and compulsion tend to feel particularly anxious about the absolute possibility of something very bad happening.

For example:

- ☐ We might believe that the house will burn down because we did not check the iron three times before we left the house.

Low self-confidence in our own ability to harness our negative feelings

Even though experiencing acute anxiety can leave us feeling exhausted, drained and distressed, some people believe that they are unable to cope with experiencing it at all. Subsequently, those relief-seeking rituals can come as an easy comfort in avoiding experiencing any anxiety at all. It is important at this point to recognise what we are doing and challenge the pattern as quickly as possible.

For example:

- ☐ Worry that our anxiety will lead to a panic attack and that other people will judge us negatively for it.
- ☐ Worry that our behaviour will change as a result of the anxiety that we experience and we will be seen as ‘crazy.’

Difficulty accepting the ‘unknown.’

One reason why it can be particularly hard to challenge those relief-seeking rituals is because we feel as if it provides the comfort of “if I do this, the worst will not happen.” When we are feeling distressed, the first thing that we reach out for is security. However, it is important to remind ourselves that we don’t know what will happen in the future, regardless of the precautions that we take through performing a ritual.

For example:

- ☐ We need to be sure that the ritual has been completed exactly right (counted and checked).

The problem with this is that we are giving ourselves (and others) unachievably high standards if we believe that disaster can only be avoided if we complete something perfectly. This just is not realistic in our day-to-day lives - accidents happen and nothing is as black-and-white as we want it to be.

Allowing our thoughts to believe they are more important than they are in reality

If we believe that our thoughts are more important than they really are, it can make it difficult to shift away from that vicious cycle of obsession and compulsions.

For example:

- Adding significance to a negative thought such as harming our own family can make us feel even more distressed as we may then feel responsible for any danger. We then resort to relief-seeking rituals to rectify this.

Similarly, some people believe that by thinking about something negative happening, then it will actually happen. They then add further pressure to themselves by taking responsibility if something goes wrong.

As discussed before, it is important to recognise that these are just thoughts based on assumptions. They are unhelpful in their nature because they are perpetuating a vicious cycle of unhelpful obsessions and compulsions.

Try to consider whether you follow any of the patterns suggested above. If so, think about what category they might fall into. You will most-likely find that you may relate to a combination of these as we are all unique. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

How to confront unhelpful thoughts

Now that you are aware that you may be experiencing unhelpful thoughts that lead to obsession and compulsion and you can recognise how it affects you. Now it is time to break down your experience even further. This *Self-Help Guide* now aims to provide you with a useful strategy to help you challenge those unhelpful thoughts as you experience them.

Try to consider three points:

1. **Situation** – e.g., *You are about to pick up your friend's child from school. You are worrying about having a car accident.*
2. **How you feel** – *Nervous, anxious and scared.*
3. **Unhelpful thought** – *I am going to have a car accident. The child will get hurt.*

Great, now that you have successfully learned how to challenge the unhelpful thought, you can now move on to ask these questions:

Challenging those unhelpful thoughts

Is there any concrete evidence that actually contracts this negative thought?

- ☐ I passed my driving test and I have been driving safely for years.
- ☐ I have no intention of having an accident or harming anyone.
- ☐ I did not want to have this thought

If you were talking to a friend who was struggling with a similar thought, would you apply the same standard to them?

- ☐ No, I would tell them they are more than capable of driving safely as they have done so for many years already.

Can you remember a time when you had been in a similar scenario and not acted on a relief-seeking ritual?

- ☐ Yes, once I picked up my child's friend from school and I was distracted by them telling me about an incident in the playground. Before I knew it, I had dropped the child at the house already and I hadn't worried about anything for the entire journey.

How could this benefit your current situation?

- ☐ It is clear that using a distraction helps. Perhaps I could put on some music, or talk to the child to help take my mind off the anxious thoughts.

What are the pros and cons to this way of thinking?

- ☐ There are not any benefits. This is an unhelpful way of thinking and actually restricts me from moving on.
- ☐ Cons: I feel unhappy, anxious and distressed.

Now that you have successfully broken down what you are experiencing into manageable bites, how do you feel? Do you think you will be able to apply this to an experience that you listed in your Hierarchy of Exposure? If you consciously apply this to the way you are thinking about a difficult scenario, you will find that you will develop a more balanced and realistic view. This will help you overcome the obsessions and compulsions too.

It can sometimes be helpful to reassure yourself that it is normal to experience unhelpful thoughts sometimes and that they do not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation. Just because we fear that something might happen, does not mean that it will happen.

End Statement

We hope that you have come to understand more about obsessions and compulsions as well as some of the causes and ways in which they are commonly triggered and fuelled. Everyone is shaped by their own life experiences, so it is important to remember that more that is likely to be due to a combination of different reasons as to why you may be suffering from the symptoms. The strategies detailed in this *Self-Help Guide* will need to be practised regularly and consistently in order for you to benefit from the positive effects of developing your own ability to manage your obsessions and compulsions. It is crucial that you allow yourself time and patience too. You can do this and you have already started out along your journey to overcome what you are experiencing by reading this guide. If you have any further questions or need more support, please feel free to reach out to us at Arkesie.

