mindhealth FACT SHEET

OCD & INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS · UNDERSTANDING IT

Intrusive thoughts & OCD

The thought is not the problem, and it does not make you a bad person.



The obsession
Unwanted, distressing thoughts

The anxiety
A jolt of fear or "wrongness"

The compulsion
Checking, washing, seeking certainty

01 Everyone has intrusive thoughts

Strange, disturbing or taboo thoughts pop into almost everyone's mind: about harm, contamination, doubt, or things that simply feel "wrong." They are mental noise, not intentions, and they say nothing about your character. OCD is not the thought itself; it is the distress it triggers and the desperate effort to make it go away.

02 Why the cycle tightens

A compulsion (checking, washing, repeating prayers or phrases, mentally reviewing, seeking reassurance) brings a moment of relief. That relief is the trap: it teaches the brain the thought was truly dangerous, so it returns louder and demands the ritual again. Relief today buys more anxiety tomorrow. Learning to let the thought be there, without performing the ritual, is what loosens its grip.

03 What genuinely helps

- Exposure and response prevention (ERP): the evidence-based approach
- Allowing uncertainty instead of chasing certainty
- Naming thoughts as "OCD noise", not commands or facts
- Easing off reassurance-seeking, kindly and gradually
- Support from a psychologist experienced in OCD

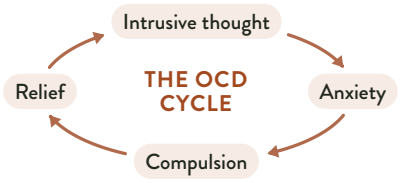
A PRACTICAL STORY

From fighting the thought to letting it pass



THE CYCLE

How OCD feeds itself



The ritual relieves anxiety for a moment, then strengthens it. Resisting, and waiting, is how it fades.

PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

Let it be there

1. Notice: "that's an intrusive thought"
2. Resist the urge to check or fix
3. Let the discomfort rise and pass

You don't have to answer every thought.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

If intrusive thoughts or rituals are eating up time or distressing you, effective help exists. Ask your GP about a Mental Health Treatment Plan and a psychologist experienced in OCD.

DID YOU KNOW?

In a 1978 study, Stanley Rachman and Padmal de Silva found that most people without OCD also have unwanted, intrusive thoughts.

Rachman & de Silva, Behaviour Research and Therapy, 1978

THE KEY TAKEAWAY

A thought is just a thought. You are not what crosses your mind: you are what you choose to do next.

Need support right now? Lifeline **13 11 14** · Emergency **000** — available 24/7. More options: **mindhealth.com.au/urgent-help**

TALK TO US WHEN YOU'RE READY

Parramatta and online, Australia-wide · **Book at mindhealth.com.au**

1300 084 200

MH-CR-210 · v32 · October 2026

© 2026 Mind Health · General information, not medical advice · CC BY-NC-SA 4.0