



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE
Filiale S.D.G./Prescott-Russell Branch
Telephone: 613-933-5845 or 1-800-493-8271

Fact Sheet

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

Although this Fact Sheet was created with input from consumers of mental health services, psychologists and psychiatrists, the information is of a general nature. More comprehensive information can be obtained from libraries, including Ontario Division, and your local CMHA branch.

WHAT IS OBSESSIVE- COMPULSIVE DISORDER?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a chronic condition that can be severely disabling. A person is plagued by repetitive thoughts and behaviours that are senseless and distressing. Most of the time the individual knows that his/her obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours are not necessary, but is powerless to stop. If the disorder becomes severe enough, it can destroy the person's capacity to function at home, at work or at school. Studies indicate that this disorder may affect as many as 2% of the population.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES?

Obsessions: Experiencing unwanted recurrent and disturbing thoughts, such as, "My hands may be contaminated and I must continually wash them."

Compulsions: Repetitive and seemingly deliberate behaviour in response to an obsession. Example: An individual feels compelled to wash their hands every time they shake hands because of fear of contamination, which they recognize as obsessive.

Many individuals are able to keep their obsessive compulsive symptoms under control during the hours when they are at work or at school and can be remarkably successful in concealing their symptoms from friends and co-workers. This may prevent them from receiving professional treatment which could be of help to them.

WHAT CAUSES OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER?

Growing evidence suggests the cause may be a biochemical imbalance in the brain, particularly with regard to one particular brain messenger called "serotonin." The ongoing search for causes and research on treatment is promising for people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and their families.

WHO GETS OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER?

Men and women are likely to have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Although most symptoms begin in the mid 20's almost a third of the cases begin by the age 15. There is an enormous difference between healthy people with compulsive streaks and those suffering from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS?

Great strides have been made in the treatment of Obsessive Compulsive Disorders in recent years. Eighty-percent of patients respond to treatment. Treatment of Obsessive Compulsive Disorders does require the individual's full cooperation and understanding and some people prefer to live with their difficulties rather than seek treatment.

Many people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorders benefit from a form of behaviour therapy in which they are confronted with their obsession or are gradually exposed to circumstances that trigger their compulsive behaviour.

Certain anti-depressant medications may help individuals who are bothered by obsessions. However, all drugs may produce some side-effects, and it is important that the recipient understand how anti-depressants work and of the potential side effects.

Family counselling sessions can help both the individual and the family by increasing understanding.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Remember you are not alone. If you or someone you know appears to suffer from obsessive compulsive disorders, you may want to contact your family physician, or your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association for information and referrals.