

Understanding OCD compulsions

Recognizing the actions—and the quiet rituals—behind the anxiety.

A compulsion is an action or mental ritual someone feels driven to do to reduce distress, prevent a feared event, or get a “just right” feeling. Relief is often brief, and the urge can return. These examples are not a checklist for diagnosis.

Checking

Checking again and again, even after something has already been checked.

- Returning to check a locked door or an unplugged appliance.
- Revisiting homework to make sure no mistake was missed.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if I missed something and someone gets hurt?

Washing & cleaning

Washing or cleaning repeatedly to try to remove a feeling of contamination.

- Washing hands again after they are already clean.
- Cleaning belongings or changing clothes after ordinary contact.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if germs or something harmful spread to me or someone else?

Reassurance seeking

Looking for certainty from other people or information, over and over.

- Repeatedly asking, ‘Are you sure nothing bad will happen?’
- Searching online for the same answer despite earlier reassurance.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if I am wrong, unsafe, or a bad person?

Mental rituals

Repeating thoughts or reviewing events privately to try to ease distress.

- Silently repeating a word, prayer, or phrase until it feels right.
- Replaying an interaction to check what it meant.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if this thought says something terrible about me?

Ordering & arranging

Adjusting things until they feel exact, balanced, or ‘just right.’

- Realignment books, toys, or school supplies repeatedly.
- Starting an arrangement over because it feels uneven.

The worry or feeling underneath

Something feels wrong or incomplete unless I fix it.

Counting

Using numbers or a set number of repetitions to try to feel safe or complete.

- Counting steps, objects, or sounds according to a private rule.
- Repeating an action a particular number of times.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if something bad happens unless I use the right number?

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More ways compulsions can show up, and a compassionate starting point for parents.

Neutralizing thoughts

Trying to undo or cancel an unwanted thought with another thought or action.

- Replacing an upsetting mental image with a 'safe' one.
- Touching an object or saying a phrase to cancel a scary thought.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if having this thought makes a bad event more likely?

Repeating

Doing an everyday action again until it feels correct or finished.

- Going through a doorway again or sitting down repeatedly.
- Repeating a movement because the first attempt felt wrong.

The worry or feeling underneath

I cannot move on until I do this the right way.

Other rituals & confessing

Following private rules or repeatedly confessing to try to relieve doubt or guilt.

- Following a superstitious routine to prevent a feared outcome.
- Confessing small details repeatedly to feel completely honest.

The worry or feeling underneath

What if leaving this out brings harm or means I am dishonest?

Look beyond what you can see

Mental rituals can be exhausting even when no one else notices them. An unwanted thought is not a wish or an intention. Everyday habits are not automatically compulsions; distress, time, and interference with life matter.

A supportive next step

Listen without blame. You might say, "I can see this feels really hard. We can get support together." Avoid punishment or abruptly forcing rituals to stop. A clinician experienced in OCD can help your family make a plan, including how to respond to repeated reassurance requests.

If rituals are affecting school, sleep, relationships, or daily routines, speak with a qualified mental health professional. Effective OCD treatments include cognitive behavioral therapy with exposure and response prevention (ERP).

Educational information only. Not a diagnostic tool or a substitute for individualized professional advice. Original H4PN educational wording; categories overlap and are not exhaustive.