

teenVOGUE

Stress, Obsess, Repeat: What It's Like to Have OCD

By Valerie Tejeda

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Irrational thoughts, intense rituals, fears that just won't go away:
Obsessive-compulsive disorder (commonly referred to as OCD) is very
real, extremely debilitating, and currently affecting as many as a million
children and teens in the United States.

The anxiety disorder has two components—obsessions and compulsions. People with the condition have extreme fixations (on things like keeping

objects in order or being free from germs), and engage in compulsive behavior (like counting, chanting, or handwashing) to get relief and to assuage their fears. It's a vicious and exhausting cycle, and even though people with OCD know their thoughts and actions are unreasonable, their brains won't let them to stop. It's completely beyond their control.

Jane, a high school freshman from Georgia, obsesses about cleanliness to the point where she breaks down in tears whenever something is out of place. "If I clean my room and someone just steps inside it, I'll start to cry," she says. "I don't let anyone in my family come in my room because I like to keep it a certain way and I think they'll make it dirty." Jane says her OCD has gotten so bad that she won't have friends over because she worries they'll contaminate her space: "If a friend was in my room, it wouldn't be clean anymore, and the thought of that makes me really stressed."

High school senior Kim's OCD manifests itself through fearful thoughts. "Every day I think something bad is going to happen to me or I'm going to die," Kim explains. "Whether it's having a heart attack, getting cancer, or getting the flu, I'm always afraid." Kim misses out on school activities and outings with friends because she believes they're too dangerous.

Counting and superstitions control the life of Julie, a high school junior in Oregon who often doesn't want to leave her house. "I have these thoughts that if I don't do things a certain amount of times, it will ruin my day," she says. "For me it's the number seven, so I switch the lights on and off seven times and count to seven constantly. I try to stop, but I can't."

While OCD can leave sufferers hopeless, certain treatments that have proven successful. Medication (typically antidepressants) plus ERP

therapy (this stands for "exposure with response prevention" and involves exposing yourself to your fear and then not doing the compulsion) have been found to be particularly effective.

Dr. Elizabeth McIngvale-Cegelski, a spokesperson for the [International OCD Foundation](#), spent her teen years suffering from the disorder, but now manages her condition thanks to ERP. "As a teenager, I struggled with various forms of OCD including contamination, scrupulosity, hyper-responsibility, harming fears, number and color issues, symmetry/ordering, and arranging," she says. "The majority of my fears were centered around the idea that something bad would happen to someone that I loved, so I performed various rituals to try to prevent that."

Now working in the mental health field, Dr. McIngvale-Cegelski dedicates her time to helping others suffering from OCD, particularly those who can't afford therapy or don't have access to it. Her self-help site, [OCD Challenge](#), is free and based on the principles of ERP: "This is a great option if ERP treatment with a therapist is not available or accessible, or to use in conjunction with a therapist and after treatment as a relapse prevention tool."

The biggest thing those suffering from OCD should keep in mind is that they're not alone. There are many people out there who also have the disorder—and have gotten better. "You can learn to manage your illness and live the life that you deserve without your OCD having the control," Dr. McIngvale-Cegelski says. "Treatment is hard, but more than worth it. It can allow you to have your life back."

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