What is OCD?

Unwanted thoughts that feel urgent, and the things you do to make them stop.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) has two parts.

Obsessions
Unwanted thoughts, images, urges or doubts that keep coming back and cause distress. They feel important and dangerous, even when you know they do not make sense.

Compulsions
Things you do, out loud or in your head, to get rid of the distress or to stop something bad happening. They bring short relief, and then the doubt returns.

Common themes

Theme	Obsessions	Compulsions
Contamination	Fear of germs, illness, dirt or of spreading something	Washing, cleaning, avoiding touching things
Harm and responsibility	"Did I leave the cooker on?" "Did I hit someone with the car?"	Checking, retracing steps, asking others
Unwanted thoughts	Violent, sexual or blasphemous thoughts that horrify you	Reviewing, praying, neutralising, avoiding triggers
Order and "just right"	A feeling that things are uneven, incomplete or wrong	Arranging, repeating, redoing until it feels right
Doubt about relationships or identity	"Do I really love them?" "What if I am not who I think I am?"	Testing feelings, comparing, seeking reassurance

Things worth knowing

- **OCD is common.** It affects about one or two people in every hundred.
- **The thoughts are not the problem.** Nearly everyone has strange, unwanted thoughts. In OCD they get treated as dangerous.
- **It targets what you care about.** A gentle person gets thoughts about harm. A devoted parent gets thoughts about their child. The distress shows how far the thoughts are from who you are.
- **Compulsions keep it going.** They are the part we can change.

It can be treated
The treatment with the strongest evidence is exposure and response prevention (ERP): facing the thoughts and situations a step at a time, and learning to leave the compulsion undone.

My notes and questions

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