Where does OCD come from?

What is known about the causes of OCD.

There is no single cause of OCD. It seems to come from a mix of things, none of which you chose.

Biology
OCD runs in some families, and brain circuits involved in spotting errors and danger appear to be over-active. The "something is wrong" signal fires when nothing is wrong, and is slow to switch off.

Temperament
People who are careful, conscientious and caring, and who take responsibility seriously, seem more prone to it.

Learning
Messages picked up along the way: that thoughts matter as much as deeds, that mistakes are unforgivable, that you must keep others safe.

Life events
OCD often starts or flares at times of stress or new responsibility: exams, a first job, a new relationship, becoming a parent.

Why your particular thoughts?

OCD goes after whatever matters most to you. The content changes from person to person and can shift over time, but the pattern is the same: a thought that offends your values, taken as a sign of danger.

That is why the thoughts feel so awful. If you did not care, they would not bother you.

What this means

- Having OCD says nothing bad about you. If anything, it reflects how much you care.
- You did not cause it, and you could not have prevented it.
- How it started matters less than what keeps it going now. That part, the compulsions and avoidance, is what treatment changes.

In short
OCD is a false alarm. You do not need to work out why it is going off. Treatment is about learning not to respond to it.

My notes and questions

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