

# UNDERSTANDING OCD

## What is OCD?

An anxiety disorder where people often experience:

- **Obsessions:** unwanted, distressing thoughts, urges or images.
- **Compulsions:** repetitive behaviours or mental rituals done to reduce anxiety.

OCD often targets what matters most, making it feel especially convincing. Having intrusive thoughts does not mean you want them or that they say anything about who you are. Everyone has intrusive thoughts, but OCD involves the brain marking them as dangerous.



## Interrupting the Cycle

Change comes from responding differently, **not** from eliminating thoughts.

Helpful practices include:

- Noticing and naming: "This is OCD."
- Allowing anxiety to rise and fall without fixing it
- Reducing the length or delaying when you engage in compulsions
- With repetition, the brain learns: "I can have this thought and still be safe."

## Relevance vs. Irrelevance

OCD is reinforced when thoughts are treated as important, urgent, or meaningful.

When a thought feels relevant, the brain pushes for certainty or action!

Recovery involves practicing irrelevance:

- Not deciding if the thought is true or false
- Not giving it extra attention or urgency
- Responding with: "This may or may not matter, and I don't need to engage."

**Less relevance = less power over time.**

## Additional Strategies that help Support Recovery

These don't remove OCD, but make non-response and acceptance easier:

- **Mindfulness:** A short, regular practice (*1-5 minutes daily*) helps considerably, training noticing thoughts without engaging. Apps like *Healthy Minds* and *Insight Timer* offer accessible guided practices.
- **Breathwork:** Breathing patterns that can help include *pursed-lip breathing*, *diaphragmatic/belly breathing*, and *physiological sighs*. These signal safety to the nervous system and reduce urgency.
- **Regulation:** Regular quality sleep, nourishment, gentle movement, nature, and safe connection.

## Exposure & Response Prevention (ERP): How Change Happens

ERP works by gently facing feared thoughts, urges, feelings, or situations while reducing compulsions and safety behaviours.

During exposures: Anxiety rises → we work to engage in an alternate behaviour → anxiety eventually decreases.

- This natural rise and fall is called habituation (or learning).

Each time this happens, the brain learns: “This feeling is uncomfortable, but not dangerous.”

Over repeated practice: Anxiety becomes less intense, urges to compulse become weaker & thoughts feel less relevant and less urgent.

ERP isn't about forcing fear away, it's about allowing uncertainty while choosing to respond differently.

This retrains the brain and weakens the OCD cycle over time.

