

OCD: Do Your Quirks Rise to the Level of This Disorder?

Mary felt like a prisoner to her fear of burning her house down.

Despite having never left the stove on, Mary was convinced that if she left the house without checking the stove three times, her house would catch fire. If she left the house and forgot to check, or couldn't remember if she had, she would turn the car around and come back.

One day, Mary had had enough. She just stopped going back, telling herself, "Well, I guess the house is going to burn down then. I'm not turning back."

At first she was terrified, convinced her house wouldn't survive, but after a couple of times of confronting her fear, she now feels free of it.

Is Mary quirky or does she have OCD?

Used in everything from creating eccentric TV characters to being the punch line on late night TV talk shows, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is often oversimplified and misused. But for those who suffer from OCD it's no joke.

What Is It?

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder where people experience obsessions and/or compulsions.

Obsessions are unwanted, persistent thoughts, such as about germs or intruders, or images of doing—or actual impulses to do—something destructive.

Compulsions are deliberate behaviors (washing, checking, organizing, hoarding) or mental rituals (praying, counting, repetitive statements) typically performed to reduce the anxiety triggered by the obsessions.

For instance, people with an obsessive fear of uncleanliness and infection may wash their hands repeatedly or refuse to shake hands or touch things that they believe are "contaminated."

People who have an obsessive desire for exactness and need everything to be "just so" and "in its place" may be compelled to organize food cans by size and with the labels facing in the same direction.

How Does OCD Impact People's Lives?

Left unchecked, OCD can rule a person's life by taking up significant amounts of time and energy and leaving sufferers feeling anxious and exhausted. This can interfere with one's ability at work, impeding professional development and advancement. It can also prevent some people from forming intimate relationships.



So how do you know if your quirk rises to the level of OCD?

The Thought/Behavior May Be OCD If It:

- Is constant, recurring and intrusive.
- Interferes with a person's ability to function in daily life.
- Is out of control.
- Is compulsive or highly ritualistic.
- Causes the person to feel anxious and nervous most of the time.

What Can You Do?

If you or someone you know has OCD there are ways to help.

- **Insight.** Educating oneself about the symptoms and treatment is a critical first step.

- **Redirect attention.** When obsessive thoughts or compulsive urges surface, try diverting your attention to other, healthier thoughts or activities. Do something you enjoy, such as walking, listening to music or visiting with a friend.

- **Self-care.** Eat healthfully, exercise, get enough sleep, and avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine. (The latter two are powerful stimulants.)

- **Find healthy outlets.** Focus your energies on hobbies, exercise and recreational activities.

- **Structure your time.** Daily time management helps you stay organized and can help reduce anxiety and stress.

- **Therapy.** A therapist can help you learn to respond to (or even curtail) obsessive thoughts without resorting to compulsive behavior.

- **Support groups.** Interacting with others who can relate can decrease feelings of isolation.

- **Medication.** This may be warranted for severe symptoms.

It's not unusual for people to repeat behaviors, such as checking to see if they turned off the stove or not, or to have thoughts that are upsetting or out of character. It doesn't mean a person has OCD.

But when these thoughts and behaviors impede daily functioning by becoming frequent, intrusive, time consuming, debilitating and out of control it may be time to consult a doctor or mental health provider.

