

Tip Sheet for Managing Coronavirus Concerns for People Who Have OCD

News

It's tempting to check news constantly to see how the situation is developing. To combat compulsive checking, restrict your news intake to a frequency and duration that works for you. For instance, you might only check once a day for a maximum of 5 minutes, or once a week you might watch the evening news, or you might decide not to check news at all. Do whatever is most useful for you (and not for OCD).

Travel

If you're planning to travel to a region affected by the virus, identify dates by which you need to make travel decisions and whether travel providers might waive change fees. It's likely that the information you'll need to make decisions will be information released just prior to your decision-making dates. Therefore, give yourself permission not to constantly check the news or ask others' opinions to try to "figure out" which way the situation will go, as frequent checking and reassurance seeking can cause more anxiety without an increase in useful information.

If it seems like OCD is trying to make your decisions and you're travelling with someone whom you trust who doesn't have OCD, you could observe how that person is making decisions and try to follow their lead. While your travel companions may also have anxiety, if they don't have OCD, they are going to be more likely to make decisions based on current facts, not on OCD "what ifs?"

Contamination concerns

Many people in OCD treatment are trying to reduce compulsive cleaning rituals, and those in recovery may have handwashing and other cleanliness routines that are less stringent than the average American because they are trying to keep contamination compulsions in check. However, because of the present situation, give yourself permission to follow current guidelines being recommended by authorities such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The CDC and the WHO have the knowledge to be making these recommendations. OCD, no matter what it says, does not. Your goal is to restrict yourself to following valid recommendations (again, that counts out OCD). For instance, you could wash your hands as directed by the CDC/WHO but no more than that. OCD isn't going to like this, so following the recommendations becomes your exposure and response prevention (ERP) exercise. Further, the feeling of dirtiness/grossness/contamination may still linger even after you've done the recommended wash, giving you an opportunity to practice allowing those feelings to be there without doing compulsions.

Here's a way to frame these exercises to keep this whole situation in perspective. If you were a medical professional who had contamination OCD, you would still follow your profession's procedures for germ prevention, even if you were in OCD treatment. But to keep your OCD in check, you'd want to do no more than what your profession says you're supposed to do. Medical professionals with OCD work to manage this every day, and we're joining them while valid authorities tell us these protective measures are necessary.

Self-compassion

Recognize that if you're anxious about coronavirus, that's normal and you're not alone. The situation is making many people fearful, even people who don't have OCD. Allow yourself to feel anxious and realize that your anxiety might not go away while the situation is still unfolding.

Be compassionate with yourself if you're experiencing an increase in OCD symptoms. It's not your fault! Do what you can to keep your compulsions in check without trying to be perfect. If you need support, schedule a booster session with your therapist or reach out to a support group like the International OCD Foundation's My OCD Community.

You can do this!

The coronavirus situation is scary because there's so much about it that's uncertain. But if you've done ERP for OCD, you have above average skills in managing uncertainty and anxiety. You're actually more prepared to handle all the unknowns than people who haven't done ERP. While you may be scared and OCD may act up, remember that when it comes to anxiety and uncertainty, you've got this!