- Obsessive-compulsive disorder

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OCD AND BEING OBSESSIVE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Witness · 22 Oct 2025 · 6 · WHAT IS OCD? BEING OBSESSIVE IS DIFFERENT IMPACT OF OCD DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT SUPPORTING AWARENESS

While OCD and obsessive are two terms often used interchangeably in everyday conversation, the reality is that OCD is a recognised mental health condition, not just an “obsessive” personality trait.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a mental health disorder characterised by recurring, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviours or mental acts (compulsions). These compulsions are carried out to temporarily relieve distress or prevent a feared event from happening, but they are often excessive and disruptive to daily life.

Common obsessions include fears of contamination, intrusive thoughts of harm, and overwhelming doubts. Compulsions might involve repetitive hand-washing, checking locks, or counting. For someone with OCD, these behaviours can take up hours each day, significantly impacting work, relationships and overall wellbeing.

On the other hand, being obsessive in everyday language usually refers to a personality trait. Some people are naturally detail-oriented, perfectionistic or highly organised, and may even describe themselves as “a little OCD”. While these traits can sometimes be frustrating or time-consuming, they are not the same as having a mental disorder.

The key difference is that people who are simply obsessive generally remain in control of their thoughts and actions. In contrast, individuals with OCD feel driven to perform rituals to manage severe anxiety or distress.

OCD affects millions of people worldwide. The World Health Organisation (WHO) ranks it among the top 20 causes of illness-related disability in people aged 15 to 44. Despite this, the condition is often misunderstood, which contributes to stigma and delays in seeking help. Left untreated, OCD can become debilitating, leading to depression, strained relationships and difficulty maintaining employment.

A proper diagnosis is made by a mental health professional, based on the severity, frequency and impact of symptoms. Treatment for OCD often includes a combination of the following. • Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), specifically exposure and response prevention (ERP), which helps individuals face fears without engaging in compulsions.

• Medication, such as certain antidepressants, can reduce the intensity of compulsions.

• Support groups and counselling, which provide help for coping with triggers.

It’s essential to refrain from using “OCD” casually to describe perfectionism. Doing so downplays the seriousness of the condition and can make those who live with OCD feel misunderstood. Instead, increasing awareness about the impact of OCD helps build empathy and encourages those affected to seek support.

Being detail-oriented is a common personality trait, but OCD is a serious mental health condition. Recognising the difference helps reduce stigma and reminds us that OCD is treatable. — Affinity Health.