

Common Thinking Patterns in OCD

OCD often relies on predictable ways of interpreting thoughts, feelings, uncertainty, and risk. Recognizing these patterns can help you notice when OCD is asking you to solve a problem that may not need solving.

1. Intolerance of Uncertainty

Feeling that you must have complete certainty or a 100% guarantee of safety before you can move on. Even a small possibility of a negative outcome can feel unacceptable. This is a central process in many forms of OCD.

2. Overestimation of Threat

Overestimating how likely something bad is to happen, how serious the consequences would be, or both.

3. Inflated Responsibility

Feeling unusually responsible for preventing harm to yourself or others. OCD may suggest that failing to prevent harm is almost the same as causing it.

4. Overimportance of Thoughts

Treating an unwanted thought as unusually meaningful or important. You may assume that having a disturbing thought says something significant about who you are.

Thought-Action Fusion

Moral thought-action fusion: Believing that having an unwanted thought is morally similar to actually doing the feared action. This can create guilt or shame simply because the thought occurred.

Likelihood thought-action fusion: Believing that thinking about an event makes it more likely to happen. Example: "If I think about someone dying, it could make that happen."

5. Need to Control Thoughts

Believing that unwanted thoughts must be controlled, suppressed, neutralized, or monitored. OCD may warn that allowing the thought to remain could lead to danger, loss of control, or acting on the thought.

6. Intolerance of Anxiety or Discomfort

Feeling that anxiety or discomfort will continue indefinitely, become unbearable, or spiral out of control unless you do something to escape it.

7. The "Just Right" Error and Perfectionism

Feeling that something must be exact, complete, even, symmetrical, or "just right" before you can stop. The discomfort itself can become the signal that something still needs to be fixed.

8. Emotional Reasoning

Assuming that because you feel anxious, guilty, disgusted, or unsafe, there must actually be danger or a problem. In other words: "I feel it, so it must be true."

A thought is not a fact, a feeling is not proof, and uncertainty does not automatically mean danger. ERP helps you practice noticing these patterns without responding to them with compulsions.

ERP client psychoeducation handout. These patterns are common in OCD, but not every person experiences every pattern.