



The OCD cycle is a self-perpetuating loop consisting of four stages: intrusive thoughts (obsessions), intense anxiety, temporary relief through actions (compulsions) and the eventual return of the obsession. Performing compulsions provides only temporary relief, ultimately reinforcing the fear and making the obsession stronger, trapping individuals in a persistent distressful loop.

The 4 Stages of the OCD Cycle

Trigger/Obsession

An unwanted intrusive and distressing thought, image, or urge enters the mind (e.g. fear of contamination, harm or doubt).

Anxiety/Distress

The obsession causes a spike in anxiety.

Compulsion/Ritual

The individual feels driven to perform repetitive behaviours or mental acts (e.g. cleaning, checking, reassurance-seeking) to reduce the anxiety or prevent a feared event.

Temporary Relief

The compulsion brings momentary relief, but it is short-lived. The brain learns that the compulsion is necessary for safety, leading the obsession to return stronger and thus restarting the cycle.

Breaking the Cycle

Breaking the cycle often involves Exposure and Response Prevention Therapy (ERP), a form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Individuals are taught to stop performing compulsions when triggered, ultimately reducing the anxiety associated with the obsession.