

# Anxiety: Obsessions and Compulsions



**Tips for managing obsessions and compulsions while you are on the waiting list for support**

**For young people and parents/caregivers**

**Gwent Specialist Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service**

**(S-CAMHS)**

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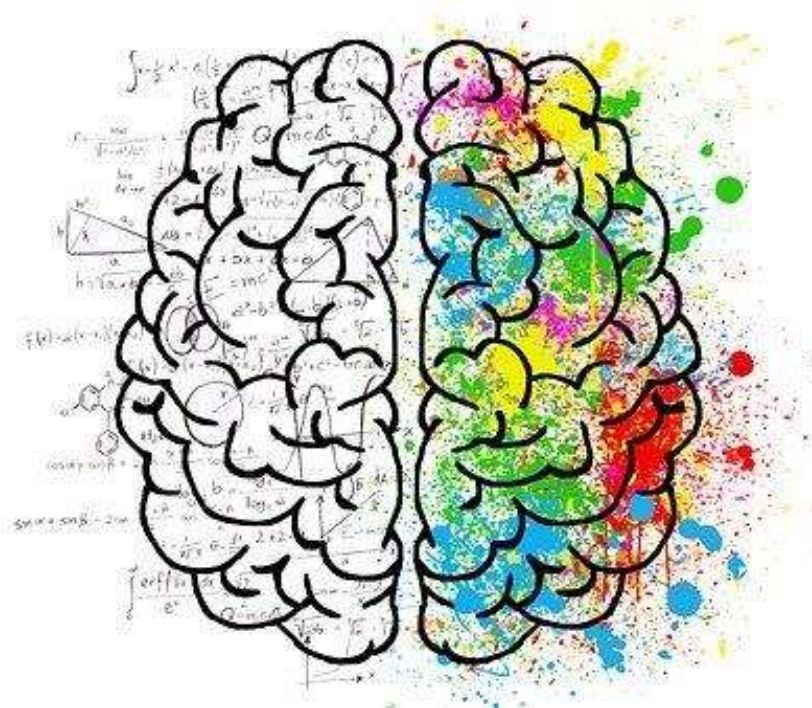
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## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a completely normal feeling, though it can be unpleasant. It might be a mild worry or a sense of unease, or it could be really extreme and a feeling of panic or terror. Some amount of anxiety is normal and actually works to keep us safe. Anxiety is helpful in letting us know when a situation is unsafe, and we might be in danger unless we respond.

Think about when we go to cross the road and we hear a car coming, its an anxiety response that makes us move out of the way. It is also our anxiety that stops us from sticking our hands into the lion's cage at the zoo- it's very helpful at the right times!

Anxiety is unhelpful when it comes up when it isn't needed, or when it is too much compared to the seriousness of the threat.



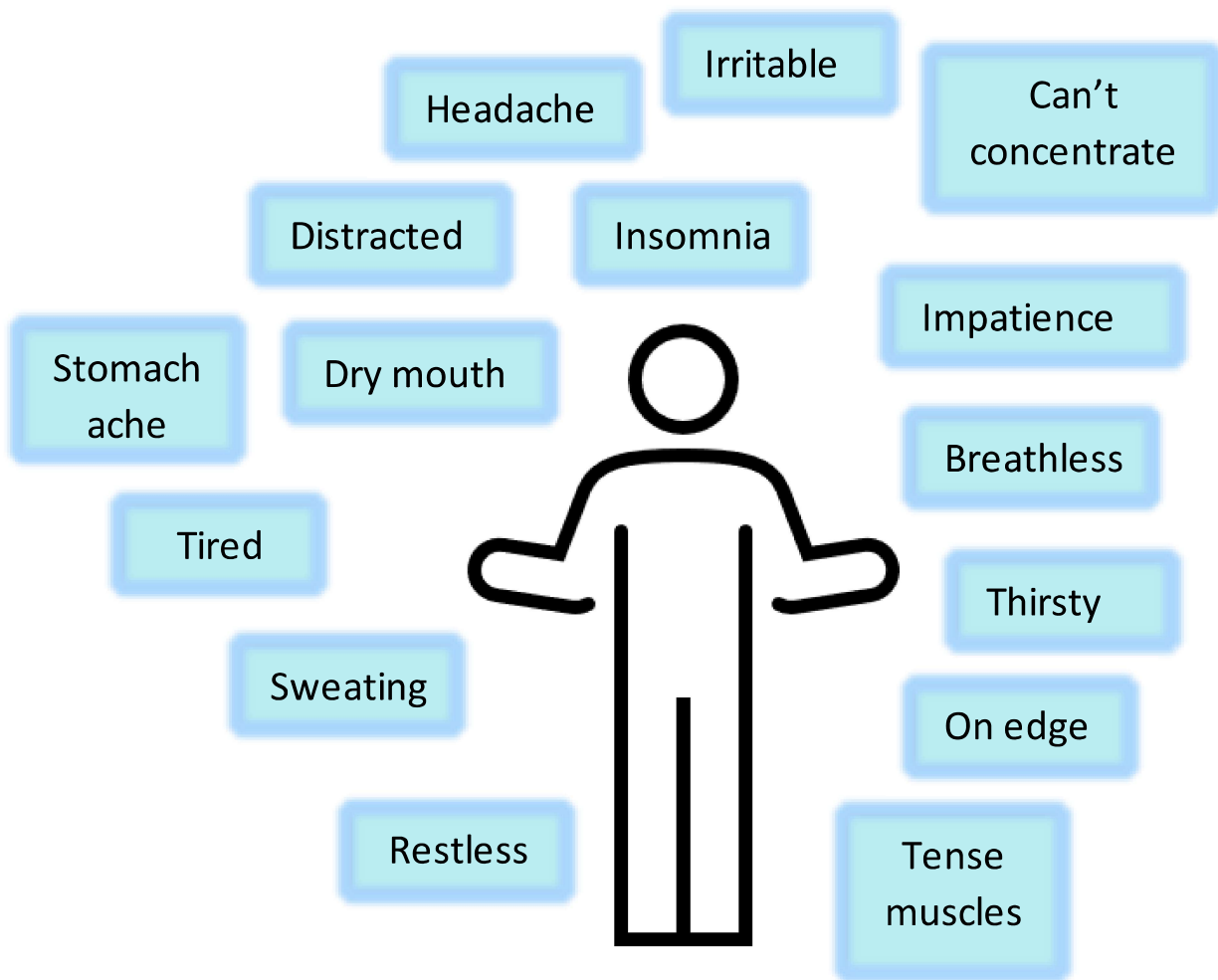
## Fight or Flight

Anxiety is caused by a biological process called fight or flight. This goes right back to when we were cavemen, when we needed our ability to run away quickly in order to survive. There aren't any sabre tooth tigers to run away from anymore, but we still have the biological response.

The fight or flight response happens when we perceive danger and our body prepares itself to run, or fight, by releasing adrenaline. This can cause all sorts of physical symptoms you might know as anxiety.

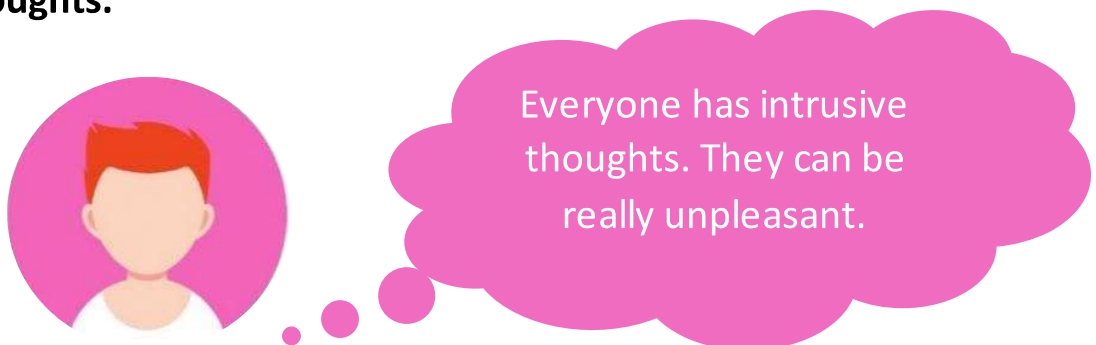
How you might feel	What our body is doing
Tight in your chest, breathless, dizzy	Breathing more quickly, to get more oxygen into our blood so it can be sent into our muscles
Heart pounding, palpitations	Heart beats faster to send the blood to our muscles, our blood pressure increases
Visual disturbance	Vision gets sharper to look for the danger, pupils get larger to take in more information
A tightness in your muscles, shaking or wobbly	Muscles get ready for action
Sweaty	Trying to get our body temperature right
Feeling sick, dry mouth, a feeling of butterflies in your stomach	Blood diverted to major muscles so digestive system shuts down
Unable to concentrate on or think about other things	Mind focuses on the threat
Needing to go to the toilet	Body clears out anything that might slow us down in running away

## How does anxiety feel?



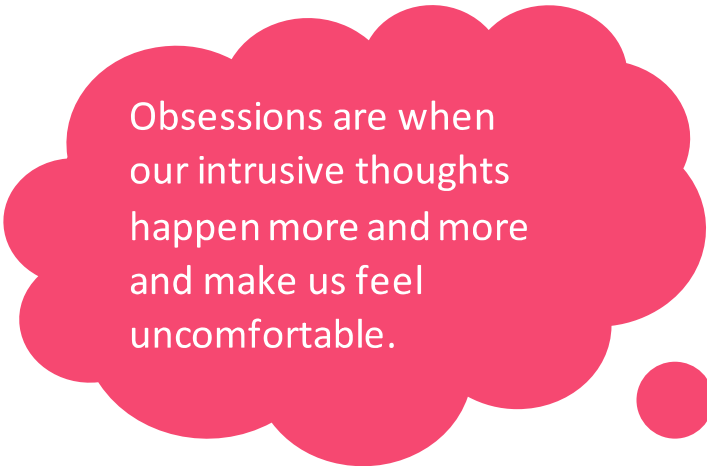
## When our thoughts are the threat

Sometimes the danger that our body is reacting to is a thought we have had. This might be a thought that something bad will happen to us or someone we care about, it might be a thought that we are bad or we might do something bad. Sometimes we might see these things as images in our mind. We call these **intrusive thoughts**.

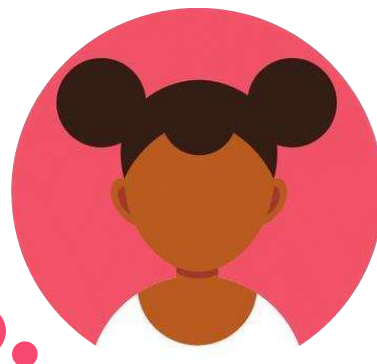


## Obsessions

Everyone has intrusive thoughts at some point, but they can become a problem when they become more frequent and start to upset us, we sometimes call these **obsessions**. Obsessions can tell us a lot about what means the most to people; people who are very close with their family might have intrusive worries about something happening to them, someone who really loves animals might worry that they will hurt their pet, or someone who has a strong faith might worry that they have offended God. We might start to do things to control the obsessions or push them away. As human beings, we like to feel certain to feel safe. But there are some things that we can't be certain about and these cause us to feel anxious.



Obsessions are when our intrusive thoughts happen more and more and make us feel uncomfortable.



## Compulsions

Compulsions are things that we do to try to help us feel certain or to 'neutralise' our thoughts. There are two types of compulsion: 1) when people worry that something *might happen* so need to check, like checking a door is locked or asking for reassurance that they won't get unwell 2) when people

worry that something *has happened* so they need to put things right, like washing hands that have become contaminated with germs.

People engage in compulsions for two reasons; firstly to try to prevent harm from happening and secondly, because they can't cope with the discomfort of their anxiety. Compulsions make you feel better in the short term, but the worries soon come back.

### Common types of obsessions and compulsions

Obsession	Compulsion
Worrying about contamination with germs	Washing hands, checking food, cleaning home
Worrying that someone might break into your home	Checking doors and windows and locked
Worrying that an accident might happen at home	checking plug sockets, making sure everything is in order
Worrying that you might have done something to hurt someone and don't remember	going back and checking, watching the news, asking someone for reassurance
Having an image that you might hurt someone you care about	avoiding them, staying away from knives, trying to have positive thoughts
Having an urge to touch something	touching things repeatedly or in a certain order



Compulsions are things we do to feel less anxious. The feelings quickly come back.

## **The Power of Thoughts**

Intrusive thoughts can become obsessions when we worry that they might mean something about us, or that something is more likely. An image of something bad happening to someone you love might feel like it is going to happen unless you do something to stop it. A thought that you might hurt someone when you go out might make you think you are a bad person who wants to hurt others. An intrusive thought about germs might make it seem more likely that you will become seriously unwell, or that you might spread germs to others. It is very important to remember:

### **Thoughts are just thoughts**

Even though they can be very convincing, thoughts don't actually have any power. Let's do an experiment. I want you to think of someone you know and I want you to concentrate really hard on making something happen to them. Not a really serious thing, maybe something like their car won't start or they lose their phone.

Or how about, lets change the weather? Look out of your window right now and whatever the weather is, concentrate really hard on making it change. See if you can make it snow!

Of course, these are silly things and we know we can't change the weather with our minds. But it's important to remember this when we think we might cause bad things to happen to ourselves or others just because we've thought about it.

The thoughts and images  
can seem real and make me  
feel like things will happen.  
I remember that my  
thoughts have no power.



### **But what if my worries are about the Coronavirus?**

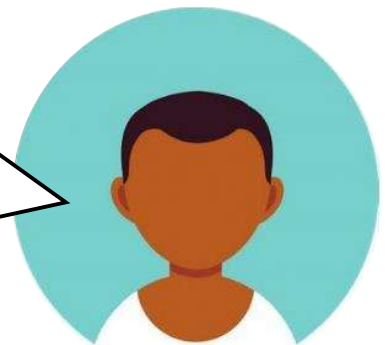
The situation with Covid-19 is scary for everyone and there is lots of uncertainty. This is a really hard time for people who have intrusive thoughts about germs, getting unwell or things happening to people that they care about.

You might find that you are washing your hands a lot and asking other people you live with to wash their hands too. You might be worried about contamination on surfaces and cleaning a lot more than you usually would. Maybe you're too scared to watch the news, or you're watching it or reading about Covid-19 online all the time. You might be feeling too worried to go out. Perhaps you need things said or done in a certain way to help yourself feel safe.



It is important to know the actual risks. Most people that catch Covid-19 only have mild symptoms and don't need to go to hospital.

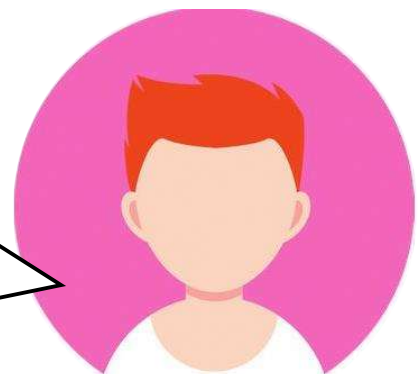
Follow government guidelines: wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and water. Any longer than this doesn't have any extra benefit. You can touch things in your home as you normally would.

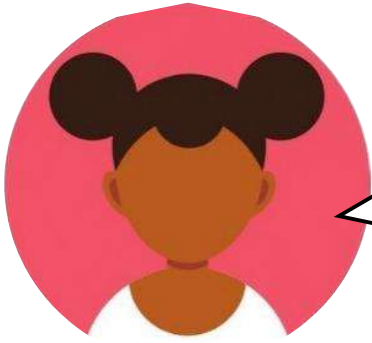


Get your news from reliable sources and limit how much you check. Maybe set yourself 30 minutes per day that you can check a reliable news source.



Be kind to yourself. This is an uncertain time and anxiety and fear are normal responses. Trying to push away these worries might make you feel more distressed.



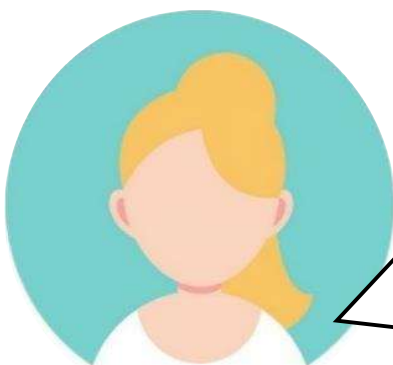


Talk to people about your worries, though try not to ask for reassurance. Instead just try saying “I feel...”

Routines are really important. Try to get up at the same time every day and get 8 hours of sleep every night. Have a set routine to wind down before bedtime.

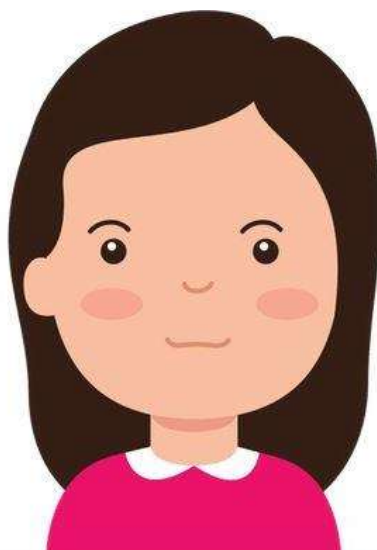


Keep in touch with family and friends that you can't see at the moment. Use Facetime, Zoom or Skype to see each other. Meet up with others who live nearby outdoors and at a distance of 2 metres.



## What can you expect when you meet with a member of the CAMHS team

- ★ When you meet with a member of the CAMHS team, they will talk to you about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or 'CBT'. This has been shown to be very helpful in helping people with their anxiety
- ★ You will meet with your therapist weekly or fortnightly at first. This might be over a video call depending on the Covid-19 situation
- ★ They will get you to draw up a hierarchy, or graded list, of things that cause you anxiety, with the thing that is most difficult at the top
- ★ You will start confronting your fears with the support of your therapist, starting with the less anxiety provoking situations
- ★ They will support you to stop the rituals that are taking up so much of your time
- ★ You will learn to tolerate uncomfortable feelings
- ★ You will be asked to practice outside of sessions



## Information for parents/caregivers

When struggling with obsessions and compulsions, children can be affected in a number of ways, including:

- Confusion about why they think, feel and behave in this way
- Embarrassed about being “different” or “crazy”
- Struggling with low self-esteem
- Feeling overly responsible for the safety of themselves and others and trapped into completing their compulsions to prevent such harm
- Difficulties with school (attendance, concentration, tiredness etc.)
- Difficulty with friendships and perhaps even experiences of bullying
- Difficulties fitting in with family life at home

### Impact on families

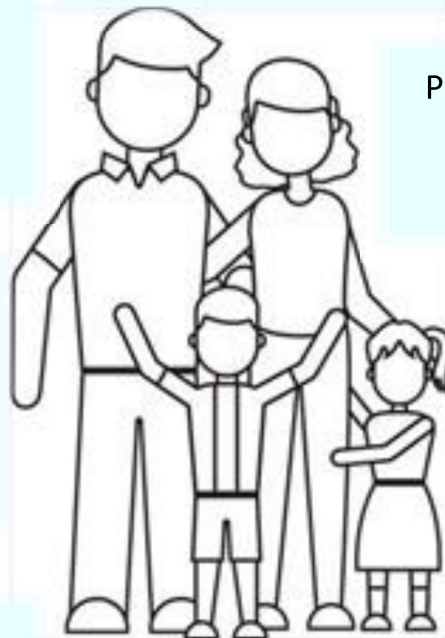
Becoming isolated from others due to the effects of obsessions and compulsions or struggling to share their difficulties with others

Tension and arguments between family members

Parents/caregivers feeling stressed and drained

Siblings feeling stressed by the young person's or their parent/caregiver's behaviour

Siblings feeling left out or overlooked



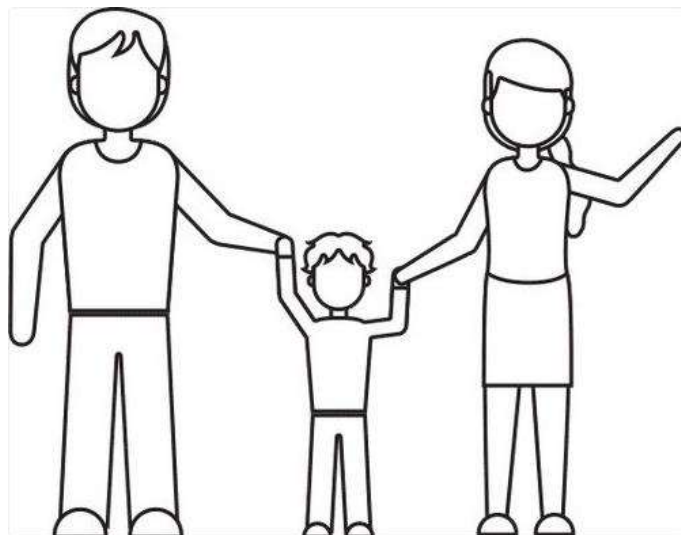
Siblings feeling too embarrassed or worried to invite friends over

Parents/caregivers feeling guilty and worried that they did something to cause this situation. Please know that you did not and that you are doing the best you can

## Why isn't reassurance working?

Often, as parents or caregivers, we naturally want to provide comfort and reassurance to our children when they are anxious. But when our child is struggling with severe anxiety, some of our natural instincts to protect and reassure them may well end up *reinforcing\** or *accommodating\** their worries. Young people may seek reassurance from others to help them manage their fears. It can act as another form of “checking” to try and get rid of the sense of uncertainty they feel about their concern. Many parents/caregivers will often give their child the reassurance they seek in an attempt to help reduce their distress. The problem is, as many parents/caregivers find, reassurance does not provide lasting relief for the young person, and the fears soon return, often requiring an even greater degree of reassurance the next time they surface.

The reason this happens is that reassurance prevents the young person from learning to better tolerate uncertainty and distress. In fact, it can even reduce their ability to cope with these things, by making uncertainty and other feared situations seem even more fearsome by continuing to avoid them. Other parents/caregivers might seek to reduce their child's distress by modifying their personal or family routines and/or avoiding certain things to accommodate their fears. Again this may feel helpful in the short-term, as it reduces the young person's immediate level of distress, but does little to help the young person challenge and overcome their fears in the long run, meaning their fears and compulsions may even get stronger as time goes on.



**What is:****\*Reinforcing**

Things that happen after or as a result of our behaviour that increase the likelihood of us doing it again in the future.

**\*Accommodating**

Participating in or supporting the young person's rituals and/or helping them to avoid the things they fear.

**Example:**

Anxious child asks parent/caregivers to reassure them that they won't get sick after touching a pack of raw chicken → Parent/caregiver reassures them they will be fine → Child's distress reduces → More likely to ask for reassurance again the next time they touch feared substances

- Helping de-contaminate items, providing excessive hand soap/cleaning products to facilitate this
- Taking a longer route home to avoid a feared location
- Tolerating delays caused by rituals

**What can I do differently?**

When supporting someone with obsessions and compulsions, parents/caregivers can consider the role of reassurance and where possible reduce the level of reassurance you offer the young person and/or otherwise accommodating their anxious thoughts and behaviours. Withdrawing such responses can be very distressing for the young person at first so, like other aspects of the intervention, this should be done gradually and in collaboration and discussion with the young person themselves. Parents can sometimes feel guilty when they realise the potentially negative impact of their instincts to reassure or accommodate their children's fears, but it is important to remember that you were most likely doing the best you could with what you knew at the time. Whilst you are waiting for support you can begin to consider where possible changes can be made and if you are uncertain you can discuss this with the clinician when you meet.

## Your role as parents/caregivers in therapy

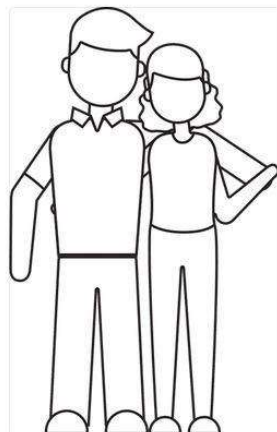
Research has shown that therapy is more effective when parents/caregivers act as 'co-therapists'. Young people will be asked to practice exposure to their fears outside of sessions and parents/caregivers are key to supporting them both practically and emotionally. Here are some ways you can help:

- Remember to take care of yourself – caring for someone with obsessions and compulsions can be a physically and emotionally draining experience. It can be easy to lose sight of your own needs whilst caring for theirs. Make a conscious effort to recognise and prioritise your own wellbeing, drawing on the support of friends, family and formal support agencies when necessary. E.g. [Youngminds.org.uk](http://Youngminds.org.uk) has a parent helpline and online contact form for advice and support
- Externalise and name the difficulties – recognise your child's anxieties as separate from them and give it a name so that you can all refer to it and the impact it is having on family life. This may sometimes help you to remember that your child cannot control what anxiety is doing to them and may reduce any frustration you or others might feel towards them, at times. So, for example, it might be helpful to name the difficulties. If the young person is struggling to get in the car as it involves touching the door handle, instead of saying "Toby is refusing to get in the car", you might say something like "The anxiety Bully is making it really hard for Toby to get in the car right now..."
- Seek to understand the nature of their obsessive thoughts and compulsions – many young people are unsettled or even horrified by their obsessive thoughts/compulsions and will try to hide them from others, making it harder for them to be resolved. Encourage your child to tell you about their thoughts and try your best not to express any distress in response; remember that such thoughts are very common and that just because we have a thought does not mean we will act upon it!

- Learn about and support the young person to use the coping skills that they find useful; these might be going for a walk, speaking to a trusted adult, taking time to play a game.
- Replace reassurance with emotional support – the difference can be subtle, but vital. Reassuring comments convey a message of perceived certainty (e.g., “you will be fine, there’s no need to worry”), whereas emotional support provides encouragement, confidence or assistance to cope with uncertainty or distress – allowing the distress to exist, whilst acknowledging that it is easier to succeed with support from others (e.g., “I know this is really difficult right now, but you can get through this. I also know how important it is for you to learn to trust yourself and the world a little bit more. I am here with you, but I can’t promise everything will be fine, we have to wait and see and learn together”)

### **Recognise that you are not alone**

Many other families are dealing with or have previously dealt with similar challenges to what you are currently facing. It can be helpful to seek support from others who have been through similar experiences and OCD-UK has a forum dedicated to supporting the family and friends with difficulties such as OCD ([www.OCDforums.org](http://www.OCDforums.org))



## Helpful Resources

### For Young People:

Young Minds Crisis Messenger provides free, 24/7 crisis support across the UK if you are experiencing a mental health crisis - just text YM to 85258. Texts are free.

OCD Action: [www.ocdaction.org.uk](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk) or helpline: 0845 390 6232 (Mon-Fri, 9:30am - 5pm)

No Panic: [www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk) or main helpline: 0844 967 4848 (Daily 10am – 10pm; charges apply). Or youth helpline for 13 - 20 yr olds: 0330 606 1174 (Mon - Fri 3pm – 6pm; charges apply)

### For parents/caregivers

Helping your Child with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: A Parent/Carer Self Help Guide, accessed at: <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Helping-your-child-with-Obsessive-Compulsive-Disorder.pdf>

OCD Action: [www.ocdaction.org.uk](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk) or helpline: 0845 390 6232 (Mon-Fri, 9:30am - 5pm)

[www.camhs-resources.co.uk](http://www.camhs-resources.co.uk) has loads of useful downloads and videos, as well as links to other websites and helpful apps.

## Useful Apps



### Headspace

An app of mindfulness and meditations to help with stress, anxiety and sleep

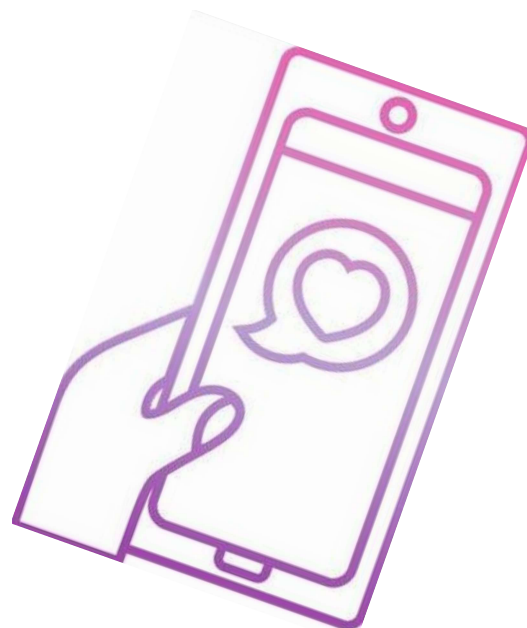
### What's Up?

CBT methods to cope with anxiety, depression, stress and more



### Catch It

Learn to manage negative thoughts and look at problems in a different way



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