

OCD: Tips for Teachers

Supporting pupils with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in the classroom

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What is OCD?

OCD is a mental health condition characterised by intrusive, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviours (compulsions) that a person feels driven to perform. These can be highly distressing and significantly interfere with a child's ability to enjoy and perform at school.

OCD is commonly associated with cleanliness and orderliness, but it can involve worry about almost anything. Some forms are not visible to others — a child may be internally repeating words, saying a prayer in their head, or seeking reassurance, all as a way of escaping the discomfort of an intrusive thought.

How to spot OCD in the classroom

Watch out for pupils who are:

- Engaging in repetitive behaviours — for example, repeatedly walking through a doorway or checking their belongings.
- Getting lost in their thoughts or seeming mentally absent.
- Frequently seeking reassurance from you or other pupils.
- Asking to go to the toilet shortly after break (to wash their hands in private).

Classroom strategies

If you think a pupil may have OCD, speak to the school SENCo and discuss strategies. Working with the student, their family, and any involved professionals, teachers can contribute to a personalised care plan. The following are practical starting points:

- **Speak up early:** early identification and intervention improve outcomes significantly. Share concerns with the SENCo or mental health coordinator as soon as you notice signs.
- **Maintain home-school communication:** open and consistent contact between school and home is essential for making progress and addressing challenges together.
- **Avoid punishment:** compulsive behaviour is driven by OCD, not wilful choice. Punishing a pupil for compulsions or related issues such as lateness will not help and will increase their anxiety.
- **Use calming strategies:** tools that help manage anxiety generally are also useful for OCD — see the NITB resources on anxiety.
- **Consider seating:** discuss with the pupil where they feel most comfortable. If their symptoms are noticeable, they may prefer to sit away from others to reduce the risk of teasing.
- **Keep the environment calm:** pupils with OCD often experience significant mental noise. A quiet, controlled classroom supports concentration.
- **Allow space and privacy:** a quiet corner or private exam room can improve performance for pupils who are anxious or who have experienced bullying.
- **Avoid cold-calling:** being called on unexpectedly or asked to read aloud can be overwhelming for anxious or perfectionistic pupils. Adjust or skip these activities where possible.
- **Create an exit plan:** an exit card and a designated safe space or trusted person gives pupils an out when they feel overwhelmed.
- **Understand their triggers:** work with the pupil to identify what triggers their OCD. Keeping a brief journal can help uncover patterns that can then be avoided or managed.
- **Reinforce what works:** notice which environments and activities help the pupil engage more freely and build more of these into their routine.
- **Apply neurodivergence accommodations:** many adjustments used for autistic pupils or those with ADHD also benefit pupils with OCD and can make the learning environment more inclusive.

Treatment

OCD is common and, with early intervention, highly treatable. Children who access CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) have a very good prognosis. More information is available at ocdaction.org.uk.

Recommended reading: *Overcoming OCD* by David Veale and Rob Willson; *Managing OCD with CBT for Dummies* by Katie d'Ath and Rob Willson.