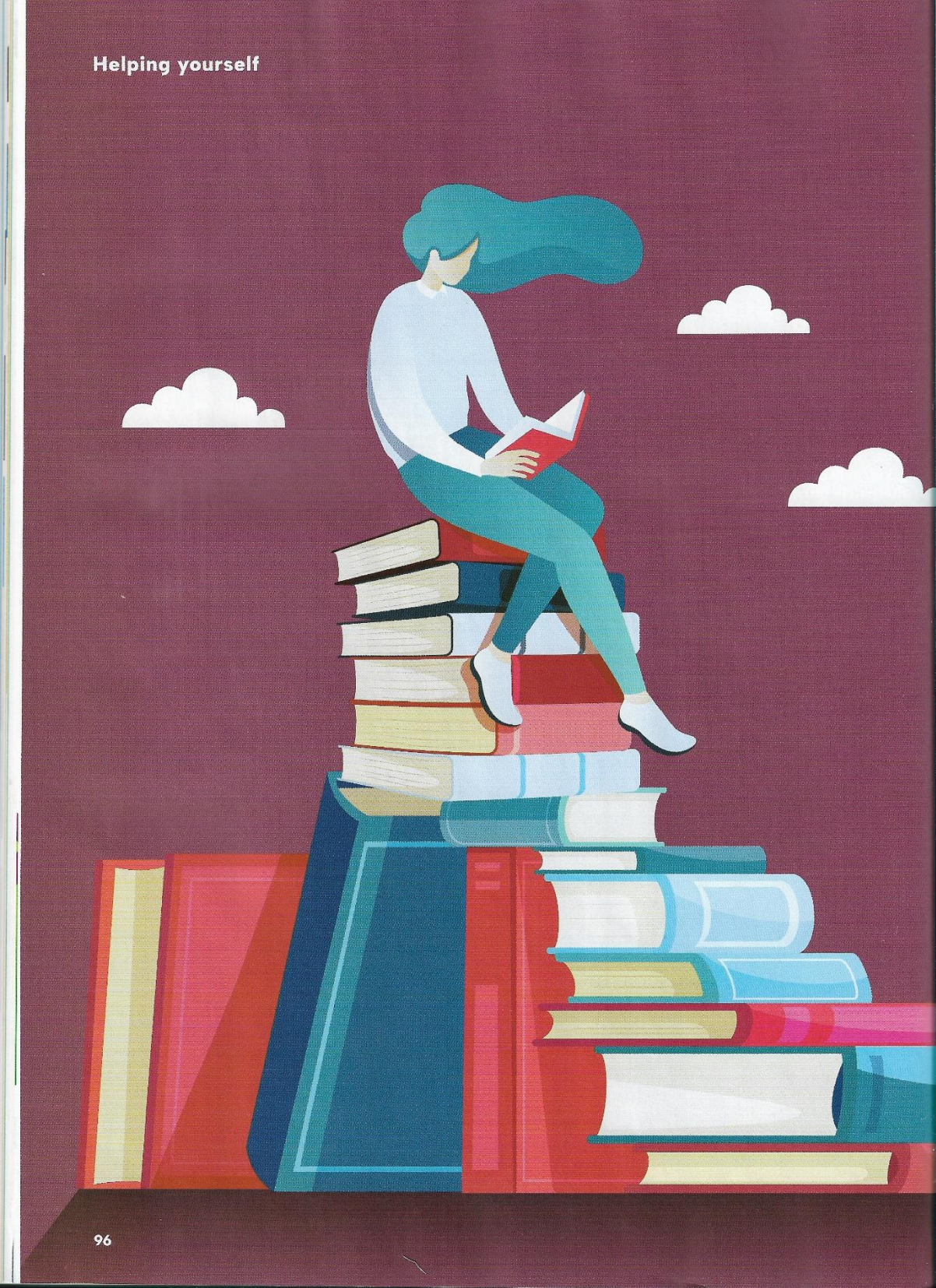


Helping yourself



# Helping yourself

Living with OCD can be tricky, but there are things you can do to reduce its power over you

Words Emma Green

**M**anaging OCD isn't about eliminating every intrusive thought or compulsion. It's about changing your relationship with them and putting together a toolbox of healthier responses that will aid in your recovery.

Whether you've been recently diagnosed or you've been managing symptoms for years, the following tools will help you regain a sense of control over the condition.

## Educate yourself

"When people first learn what OCD actually is, it can be a huge relief," says mental health therapist Shelly Dar. "It turns confusing or frightening experiences into something that makes sense. Understanding the cycle of obsessions and compulsions helps you see that you're not 'going mad' - you're dealing with a recognised condition, and that clarity is often the first step towards recovery."

Knowledge really is power. The more you understand the condition, from the OCD cycle to its numerous subtypes, the better equipped you are to challenge harmful thinking patterns and find the right kind of treatment.

It is important to be mindful of the type of content that you do consume, though. Aim for credible sources such as books written by experts in the field or established websites like the

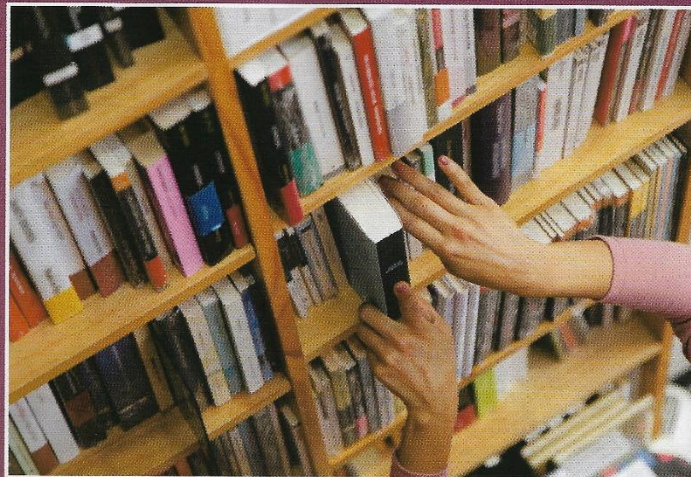
International OCD Foundation. On the other hand, it can be useful to hear of other people's lived experiences via online forums, videos and podcasts.

One thing to be aware of, however, is avoiding the OCD trap of compulsive researching. Sometimes, in the process of learning, OCD tries to hijack your curiosity. You might start reading excessively, asking endless questions or researching compulsively in order to gain reassurance.

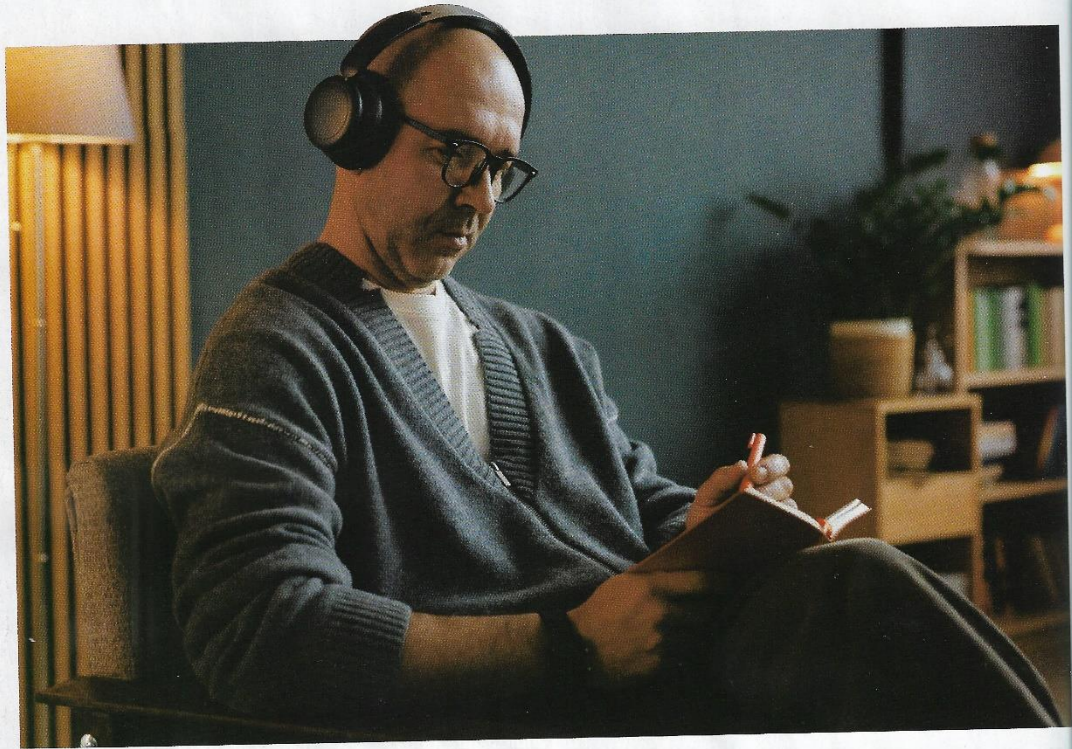
It is important to remember that knowledge is a tool, not a cure. Learning about OCD won't be a magic fix, but it is a crucial first step.

## Identify and manage triggers

One of the most powerful ways to take back control from OCD is learning to identify and manage your triggers - the people, places, thoughts or situations that set the OCD cycle into motion. A trigger is anything that sparks an intrusive thought or the urge to perform a compulsion. Triggers aren't always obvious. Sometimes, they're external, like touching a doorknob. Other times they're internal, such as a sudden thought, image or sensation.



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### “Once you’re aware of your triggers, you can begin working on strategies to reduce their impact”

Identifying your OCD triggers can help you prepare for them, challenge them and eventually reduce their power. By keeping a trigger journal on you (either a notebook or the notes app on your phone), you can start tracking when and how intrusive thoughts and compulsions arise.

You may notice patterns: certain places, people or even times of day that tend to activate your OCD. Look for any repetitive themes that might pop up such as responsibility, morality, contamination or control, which often underpin OCD’s many obsessions. And then, instead of seeing these triggers as enemies, reframe them as teachers or signals.

Once you’re aware of your triggers, you can begin working on strategies to reduce their impact. This doesn’t mean avoiding them entirely – in fact, avoidance can reinforce OCD by sending your brain the message that the feared situation is dangerous.

“Triggers can’t always be avoided, so the goal is to change your response,” says Dar. “Noticing early signs like a spike in anxiety or the urge to ritualise gives you a chance to pause. Simple grounding techniques, like slow breathing or focusing on the present moment, can help create space between the trigger and the compulsion.”

Try to lean into discomfort gradually. A key part of recovery from OCD

involves exposure. Gradual, controlled exposure to triggers (ideally with the help of a therapist using exposure and response prevention therapy (ERP)) can help to train your brain to tolerate distress without relying on compulsions. Remember: avoidance shrinks your world, exposure expands it.

### Set limits on reassurance-seeking

Reassurance-seeking is one of the most common compulsions of OCD. It might start with a simple question (‘Are you sure I locked the door?’) or a quiet mental review (‘Did I offend that person? What if I said the wrong thing?’). However, it can quickly spiral.

In the moment, getting reassurance feels like relief, but that relief is short-lived. Reassurance doesn’t satisfy OCD: it feeds it. Every time you seek it, you reinforce the idea that uncertainty is

dangerous and must be eliminated. Learning to tolerate uncertainty is one of the most difficult yet liberating parts of OCD recovery.

Start by noticing your patterns of reassurance-seeking. Keep a log of when and who you ask for reassurance. Reassurance can come from people (partners, parents, friends, therapists), the internet (searching for symptoms or answers on forums), yourself (mental checking or reviewing), and objects or rituals (checking and re-reading). Most people are surprised by how often they seek reassurance without realising it.

Then start to implement a delay strategy. Practise sitting with uncertainty instead of trying to remove it. You can do this by delaying reassurance-seeking for a set amount of time (for example, five minutes) and learning to ride the

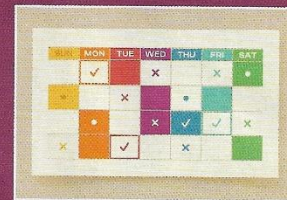
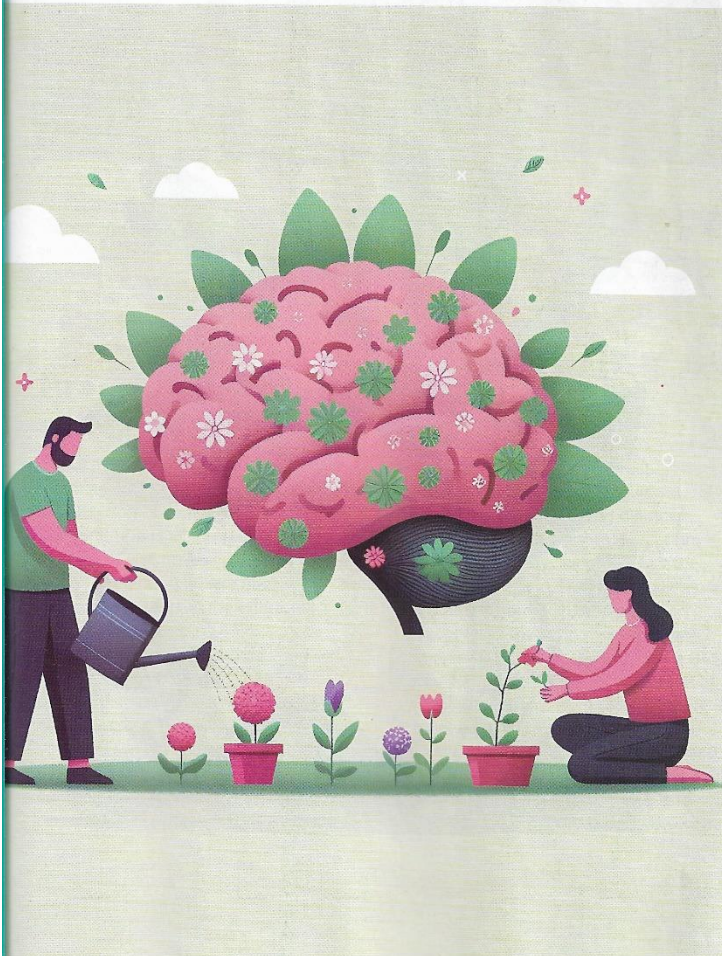
wave of anxiety. Gradually, you can increase this and build tolerance by giving yourself space to learn that anxiety will eventually fade on its own.

Reducing reassurance-seeking takes practice and may require support from a therapist or accountability from a loved one. Every moment you sit with uncertainty, though, is proof to yourself that you can handle not knowing – and a step to reclaiming your autonomy.

## Challenge perfectionism and 'What if?' thinking

Perfectionism is woven into the very fabric of OCD. It isn't just about neatness or high standards. It's about avoiding failure, guilt or catastrophe at all costs.

This can be accompanied by exhausting 'what if?' loops – for example, 'What if I left the stove on?' or 'What if I caused harm and didn't realise it?' This kind of thinking is the fuel that keeps OCD burning. It creates the illusion that you can think your way to certainty, but actually, the more you engage with 'what ifs', the more anxious you feel.



## Routine: the scaffolding of recovery

OCD thrives on chaos. Irregular schedules, stress and poor self-care can all exacerbate symptoms. Structure can reduce the sense of unpredictability that OCD latches onto – and a tool that is far too often overlooked in supporting recovery is routine.

A good routine shouldn't be rigid or perfect; it's about creating a supportive structure where healing can start to happen. Start with the very basics: sleep, nutrition and movement. Prioritise getting enough rest, eating nourishing meals and engaging in some physical activity, even if it's just a short daily walk.

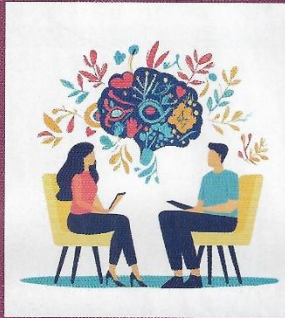
Then, build structure into your day-to-day life – time-block tasks, set gentle goals and make space for exposure practice. Make sure you incorporate time for hobbies, self-care and relaxation too, not just responsibilities.

Avoid trying to overhaul everything at once, and focus on slowly establishing one aspect or habit at a time so that it naturally immerses itself into your lifestyle. After all, a balanced routine is just another form of self-care.

## Helping yourself

At the heart of OCD is a craving for certainty and control. Perfectionism promises safety. 'What if?' thinking promises preparedness - but neither delivers, and both can keep you stuck.

To start loosening the grip of perfectionism, you need to first identify your 'OCD rules'. Some examples of



### Recovery – it takes a village

OCD flourishes under secrecy and shame. Keeping your struggles hidden often amplifies distress and makes symptoms worse. Fortunately, you don't have to face OCD alone. Reaching out for help is a brave, important step towards healing.

Whether it's talking to trusted friends or family, seeking professional help or joining a support group, connecting with others who understand or who can help can make a significant difference to your chances of recovery. Having that support can not only reduce isolation and provide much-needed perspective but it can boost motivation and offer practical insights and resources for coping with the condition.

If this feels too intimidating, online communities can also offer both anonymity and understanding. Reddit's r/OCD and OCD-specific forums and Facebook groups focused on OCD support can provide connection any time, and supplement professional care.

these might be, 'If I don't double-check, something bad will happen', 'I should never feel [insert emotion]', or 'If I'm not completely certain, I can't move forward'. Write them down. Seeing them on paper will help you recognise them as mere mental habits rather than hard truths.

Next, try responding to these beliefs with more flexible, realistic statements when they crop up. Replace them with compassionate alternatives such as: 'I trust myself to do things thoroughly the first time', or 'All emotions are valid signals that help me understand myself better'. Or try: 'It's okay to move forward with uncertainty - clarity often comes through action, not before it'.

Remember, you're not trying to prove OCD wrong. You're just practising a willingness to be unsure.

Another step is challenging 'what if?' thoughts through exposure. "Instead of trying to answer them, practise saying, 'Maybe, maybe not,'" advises psychotherapist Paula Williams. "It's uncomfortable, but it loosens OCD's grip." The key to managing these thoughts isn't trying to solve them; it's learning to tolerate them. And this is the core of ERP therapy - exposing yourself to a thought without doing anything to neutralise it.

You could also try using imperfection as a recovery tool. Start in small ways, like sending a message without





rereading it, intentionally leaving something slightly 'off', like a crooked picture frame, or making a decision without asking for reassurance. Each tiny act of imperfection is a vote for your freedom.

### Practise self-compassion

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a medical condition, not a personal failure or reflection of character. But so often, the condition is accompanied by intense feelings of shame and guilt - as well as an unrelenting inner critic. Self-compassion, then, is the antidote to this self-torture.

Some may see self-compassion as indulgent or a bit fluffy, but it is a powerful, research-backed skill that can reduce OCD symptoms, support your recovery and transform your thoughts. Most importantly, self-compassion is about giving yourself permission to heal.

**“Self-compassion will help you to respond to the pain in a way that reduces suffering over time”**

One way to increase your self-compassion is to give your inner critic a nickname, such as 'The Drill Sergeant' or 'The Prosecutor'. This allows you to notice it while maintaining distance. When this voice shows up, don't fight it. Acknowledge it by saying, 'That's the critical voice again. I'm going to listen to my compassionate voice instead'.

To develop this compassionate voice, having a go-to script to hand when OCD flares up can be helpful. An example of this might be, 'This is an OCD moment. It feels scary and overwhelming, but I know what's happening. I will respond with kindness instead of fear'. If this feels too difficult, an alternative is to practise talking to yourself as you would

a child. How would you respond to a distressed child who was having these kinds of thoughts? Try saying those same things to yourself.

Another option is to include compassion in your exposure work. Your inner critic will be quick to dismiss any progress during your recovery, so it's important to track your wins, however small. Delayed a compulsion by five minutes? Progress! Sat with discomfort without seeking reassurance? Huge! ERP therapy works best when it's paired with encouragement, not punishment.

Self-compassion won't make the pain disappear entirely, but it will help you to respond to that pain in a way that reduces suffering over time.

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