

How OCD Can Affect Your Sex Life and What You Can Do About It

Medically reviewed by [Jonathan D. Klein, MD, MPH](#) on January 3, 2020 — Written by Allie Frankel



What is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?

[Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder](#) (OCD) is a mental health condition that affects millions of people from all walks of life. It's characterized by two components: obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas, or sensations. Compulsions are behaviors or thoughts used to escape the distress caused by the obsession.

Obsessions can focus on a diverse range of themes, including contamination, religion, perfectionism, symmetry, and sexuality. What unites these diverse subsets is the intrusiveness of the thoughts. In other words, these thoughts don't align with the person's identity and value system. Because of this unwanted nature, the thoughts produce excessive worry, fear, and distress. People with any of these OCD themes can also experience problems with sexual functioning and intimacy.

Effects of OCD on sexuality

OCD's interplay with sexuality varies as much as the OCD themes. Sexual difficulties may be side effects of medication or may stem from the obsession itself. The types of sexual problems experienced include: trouble becoming aroused or reaching orgasm, low sex drive, fear of having sex, severe feelings of disgust when thinking about sexual activities, and compulsive sex to "make sure" of one's sexual orientation. In short, the precise interaction of OCD with sexuality depends on the individual and even changes throughout one's life.

Here's a collection of ways in which OCD can negatively impact one's sex life.

Depression and anxiety

It's hard to get super in the mood when experiencing chronic, unwanted thoughts of any nature. What's more, OCD often comes hand in hand with [depression and anxiety](#), which themselves can contribute to a lowered sex drive. Anxiety can cause hypervigilance, worry, distraction, and decreased sexual response. Similarly, depression can cause a loss of sexual interest.

Medication & sexual side effects

For some, medication might lower anxiety or depression levels enough to improve their sex lives, but for others the medication itself can spur problems. Antidepressants, namely SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) are standard treatment for OCD, anxiety, and depression. SSRIs can be life changing, but it is also widely known that they cause sexual dysfunction in at least a third of patients. Individuals with OCD are typically prescribed a significantly higher dose of SSRIs than people with just depression in order to target obsessive tendencies. This higher dose makes sexual dysfunction even more likely. Sexual side effects are the number one reason people quit medication prematurely. Before you decide that antidepressants are not for you, explore some of the below options; and if you do decide to wean off, do so with your provider. Suddenly stopping these medications can be traumatic to the brain.

Sexual obsessions

OCD is creative and unfortunately, prolific. It likes to torture people with endless "what ifs." *What if I contaminate my baby with an infectious disease? What if I left the oven on and my house burned down?*

When these "what ifs" focus on sexual themes, they may be along the lines of: *What if I'm gay? What if people think I'm gay? What if I'm attracted to children? What if I'm not actually attracted to my spouse?*

About 10% of OCD patients experience fears involving sexual orientation.

One common sexuality-based OCD subtype is Homosexual OCD (HOCD), also known as Sexual Orientation OCD. Individuals with HOCD experience intrusive thoughts about being attracted to people of the same sex. It's not uncommon for a straight person to become preoccupied with this possibility of being gay. Intrusive thoughts of this nature can be confusing and distressing when they conflict with the person's values and identity. Similarly, a gay person may have intrusive thoughts about being attracted to the opposite sex. OCD may suggest these sexuality "what ifs" in the bedroom, causing the sufferer to become distracted and disturbed. Sex itself can even be a compulsion for people with HOCD. For example, a straight man with HOCD may frequently engage in sexual activities with women to "make sure" he is still attracted to women and able to perform sexually with women.

Another sexuality-based OCD subtype is Pedophilia OCD (POCD). Individuals with POCD experience intrusive, unwanted sexual thoughts that involve children. Similar to how many people with HOCD are actually straight, it is very uncommon that someone with POCD is actually a pedophile. In fact, these individuals more commonly spend hours trying to prove to themselves that they are not a threat and go to great extents to avoid spaces with children, such as playgrounds and schools. It is important to note OCD's irrational nature and its focus on themes that are alien to the individual's identity and values.

Sexuality-based OCD can be very difficult to diagnose and treat given the shame around talking about symptoms. These subtypes are widely misdiagnosed by professionals, partly because of the unwillingness of patients to voice symptoms and also because of a lack of awareness of these issues.

Obsessive fears that cause people to avoid sex

While some obsessions may cause individuals to engage in compulsive sex, others may do just the opposite. Obsessions can focus on [pregnancy, STIs, or germs](#). [These fears](#) can cause extreme discomfort or even cause the individual to avoid sex all together.

What treatment options exist for overcoming these sexual challenges?

No one treatment method works for everyone, but the good news is there's a variety of options to relieve these symptoms. Here's a collection of psychotherapeutic and pharmaceutical treatment options.

Communicate with your partner

Let your partner know what's up. In certain cases, couples therapy can be helpful. Open communication can help avoid misunderstandings and can help build up trust and intimacy, foundational elements of a healthy relationship.

Talk to your provider

Voicing sexual issues to a healthcare provider can be embarrassing. However, rest assured, you would not be the first to voice this type of challenge. Sexuality is an integral part of the human experience, and experiencing sexual difficulties is very common amongst people who experience OCD, depression, or anxiety, especially amongst those taking antidepressants. A trusted primary care physician or mental health provider can help direct you toward an appropriate line of action. Standard OCD treatment includes a combination of medication and behavioral therapy.

Recommended therapies for OCD fall under the umbrella of [Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy](#) (CBT). Make sure your provider has experience with [Exposure and Response Prevention therapy](#) (ERP), the gold standard treatment to weaken OCD. Other psychotherapeutic options such as [Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy](#) (CBT), can be helpful in learning to identify and understand intrusive thoughts and have the space to choose to react to them differently. These therapies are often skill-based and conclusive, equipping patients with skills to continue to build positive habits outside of therapy.

You can also discuss prescription and over-the-counter pharmaceutical options with your provider. A medical provider might suggest you begin taking an antidepressant (SSRI) to lessen anxiety, depression, and obsessionality. In other cases, it might be appropriate to lower your current dosage to lessen side effects. Other options include switching SSRIs, as each may affect you differently. If you are content with your current SSRI and dosage but wish to decrease your sexual side effects, you can talk with your provider about adding Wellbutrin, an antidepressant that is sometimes prescribed in combination with an SSRI to lessen side effects. Adding Wellbutrin has proved effective for some, while others report increased anxiety levels.

Connect with others with similar experiences

Connecting with others who have gone through similar experiences can be an important tool for individuals with OCD. Keeping these issues bottled up can increase anxiety. It can be relieving to talk to others and realize you are not alone. Support groups can also be an excellent way to learn new coping tips and tricks that work for others.

Holistic remedies to boost libido

SSRIs (antidepressants) increase the amount of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter responsible for feelings of wellbeing. This increased sense of wellbeing can work wonders for anxiety and depression relief. However, the shift of chemicals can also cause the sexual side effects, reducing the action of dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters that are involved in levels of desire and arousal. SSRIs can also inhibit nitric oxide, a chemical that relaxes muscles and blood vessels, allowing blood to flow to the sexual organs upon arousal. The following holistic remedies may help to counteract undesirable changes due to SSRIs, such as low libido, erectile dysfunction, and orgasm difficulties. It is important to investigate possible side effects of the following natural remedies as well as their interactions with certain medications, like blood thinners. Make sure to consult with your provider to weigh the pros and cons and what option might be best presently for your optimal quality of life.

- [Exercise](#)
- [Ginkgo Biloba](#)
- [L-Arginine](#)
- [Red Ginseng](#)
- [Foods to boost libido](#)

Attention ladies, have you heard of Weed Lube?

Cannabis has been used for gynecological health for thousands of years. It's been used for menstrual cramps, pain in childbirth, and even as an aphrodisiac. Now with the legalization of cannabis in certain states, there is a movement to create Cannabis infused topicals and lubes "to enhance sexual pleasure, sensations and orgasms for people with vaginas" as stated by [Lioness](#). [Foria Wellness](#), a trusted organic brand at the intersection of cannabis and female sexual health and wellness, offers THC lubricants (available in California) and hemp-based CBD lubricant (available online in most places throughout the world).

Women are reporting enhanced pleasure, sexual renewal, and relief from pelvic discomfort. Companies like Foria claim that when applied to the vagina, these products do not cause a psychoactive high, but rather the THC dilates the capillaries, which supports claims for increased blood flow, increased sensation, and longer, more intense orgasms.

Positive reviews aside, it's important to note that there are currently very few scientific trials on these products. These companies, many women-run, boast a commitment to vaginal health and natural ingredients, though reviews remain namely anecdotal.

One complaint about Foria's products is that they are not latex safe. Other companies such as [Velvet Swing](#) and [Quim](#) have created similar, latex compatible products. [Lioness](#) explains some different options in more detail.

Reframe

It's easy to get bummed out about sexual side effects. Sexuality can be a central part of life and a key factor in relationships, so reduced functioning is no small thing. It's also easy to get swept up in trying to "fix" these issues, especially for individuals with obsessive tendencies. Becoming overly focused on "fixing" this predicament can itself create anxiety and even become an obsession. One way to avoid spending too much time and energy on being bummed out about changes in sexual functioning is to reframe your goals of sex. Orgasm, for example, doesn't necessarily need to be the end-goal. Instead of focusing on the frustration of delayed orgasm or an inability to orgasm, try to shift your focus toward mindful awareness in the bedroom and an appreciation of intimacy. The French film *Intouchables* features a scene where a parapalegic man redirects his sexual attention to his ears, one of the few parts of his body he could feel!

The takeaway

All in all, sexual challenges and side effects are nobody's idea of a good time. That said, there are resources in place to better the situation, and since so many people experience these challenges, new treatments and remedies are constantly in development. Keep an eye out!

References

- Can OCD Wreck Your Sex Life? (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culturally-speaking/201409/can-ocd-wreck-your-sex-life>.
- Foria Wellness. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.foriawellness.com/pages/about-foria>.
- Gökay Aksaray, Berkant Yelken, Cem Kaptan. (2001). Sexuality in Women with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 27(3), 273–277. doi: 10.1080/009262301750257128
- Hill, A. (2018, May 29). 12 Benefits of Ginkgo Biloba (Plus Side Effects & Dosage). Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/ginkgo-biloba-benefits#section13>.
- International OCD Foundation. (n.d.). Medications for OCD. Retrieved from <https://iocdf.org/about-ocd/ocd-treatment/meds/>.
- Intrusive Thoughts. (n.d.). OCD and Sexuality. Retrieved from <https://www.intrusivethoughts.org/?topic=sexuality>.
- Intrusive Thoughts. (n.d.). OCD Therapy (ERP, CBT, ACT). Retrieved from <https://www.intrusivethoughts.org/ocd-treatment/ocd-therapy/>.
- Kelly, O. (2019, September 19). How Low Sex Drive May Be Caused by OCD. Retrieved from <https://www.verywellmind.com/ocd-and-sexual-intimacy-2510552>.
- Lee, A. (2018, October 31). I Had the Best Orgasm with Weed Lube and I Have Data to Prove It. Retrieved from <https://lioness.io/blogs/sex-guides/i-had-the-best-orgasm-with-weed-lube-and-i-have-data-to-prove-it>.
- Lynn, B. K., López, J. D., Miller, C., Thompson, J., & Campian, E. C. (2019). The Relationship between Marijuana Use Prior to Sex and Sexual Function in Women. *Sexual Medicine*, 7(2), 192–197. doi: 10.1016/j.esxm.2019.01.003
- Raypole, C. (2019, May 31). OCD: Recognizing and Treating Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Retrieved from <https://www.healthline.com/health/ocd-recognizing-and-treating-obsessive-compulsive-disorder#support>.
- Vulink, N. C. C., Denys, D., Bus, L., & Westenberg, H. G. M. (2006, January 24). Sexual pleasure in women with obsessive-compulsive disorder? Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032705003629>.
- What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder? (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ocd/what-is-obsessive-compulsive-disorder>.
- What is OCD? (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://iocdf.org/about-ocd/>.