

Compulsive checking

Compulsive checking is a common in anxiety related behaviours and is especially common in OCD and Health Anxiety but variations of it can be found in other anxiety related disorders. Checking becomes a way of trying to gain **reassurance, certainty** and relieve anxious feelings. However, as we will see it can backfire and cause more problems. Checking becomes a **short term fix** that causes **long term** problems. Not checking will cause short term anxiety and distress for long term benefits

First, let's explore what compulsive checking really is: there is always an obsession (intrusive thought, image or urge) and a compulsion or series of compulsions (efforts to resolve the distress of an obsession). Common portrayals of OCD suffering usually involve repeated checking of things like the stove or light switches.

Checking compulsions can also be prevalent in a variety of other obsessive themes as well. For example, a person afraid that they may have hit someone with their car might return to the "scene" to check for victims or may check the conditions of the car for evidence of impact. Or in obsessive Jealousy checking your partner's phone or tablet to check they are not flirting with someone on social media.

Most checking compulsions involve literally directing one's attention to a physical object in an attempt to be reassured. So, for example, when there is obsessive doubt about whether the door of your home has been locked, you may go to the door to obtain a reassuring visual confirmation.

It's easy to understand how checking compulsions can get out of control. Like other anxiety behaviours, they follow a familiar pattern. It usually starts with a thought about uncertainty. Is this thing the way that it should be? The intuitive response may be, yeah, probably, I think. But in the absence of a confident answer, the uncertainty leaves the thinker in a state of distress. They then go back to the subject of the uncertainty and verify. The door is locked, the stove is off, the memory is correct, no harm has been done, my partner is not flirting on Facebook, etc. The distress melts away and the checker feels a sense of relief and gratitude for having checked. But there's another lesson that gets picked up by the brain in this process. Because the initial intuition was not trusted (that the object in question was probably fine) and the checking behaviour effectively rendered that trust irrelevant, the brain learns insecurity. In other words, the next time a similar question arises, the brain goes straight to we can't be trusted, better check. Checking, like all compulsions, leads to more doubt in the long run and more compulsive behaviour.

To get to the **goal of renewed confidence in uncertainty tolerance**, simply reducing checking (even to zero) may not be enough. **Doing exposure to the feared consequences of your failure to check may be an important part of treatment.** This can be achieved in a number of ways:

- **Writing/reading an exposure script describing the unwanted consequences occurring**
- Creating increasing reasons to check (driving more, cooking more, turning appliances off and on more, etc.)

This should help you cope with the consequences: You can live with things not going as planned

Today there are some harmful products that cater to compulsive checkers by allowing them take pictures of checked items and send reminders that they are safe. This is the opposite of what actually brings freedom. **The goal is to increase confidence in one's ability to guess and move along.** This is not a plea for recklessness – of course we sometimes want to be extra careful and check to make sure we've properly turned off a machine or check that we've correctly calculated an expense on our taxes. Once. But for all the suffering we might endure trying to be certain that we have checked enough, we end up damaging our ability to trust our memories and intuitions.

If you suffer from obsessive doubt and compulsive checking, you can win back your freedom by remembering this: **It's not about the specific thing you wanted to check, but about the willingness to feel what it feels like to be uncertain.**

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Adapted from <https://www.sheppardpratt.org/>