

## The unique content of your obsessions

Although obsessions tend to relate to one of the main themes (contamination, harm, aggression, sex, religion, order, or symmetry), the exact content usually depends upon the values of the individual, by which we mean which people or things he or she regards as most important to protect from harm. Hence a mother has an obsession about stabbing her baby son because he is the most precious thing that she can imagine and she cares deeply for him. Interestingly, such thoughts also occur in men and women without children, because children are important to their life in some other way: for example, they might want to work with children or wish they had a family. The intrusive thoughts represent their deepest fears — that they could be responsible for harming a vulnerable child, or that they will have their liberty taken away and be shamed. Intrusive thoughts and images therefore represent particular worries. Couple these thoughts/worries with the belief that you are able to prevent bad events from happening and suddenly, as if by magic, you have an obsession.

Similarly, Anthony - a man who has intrusive images of masturbating over his mother is revealing his deepest fears and disgust. His mother is dying from cancer; he loves her enormously and it's very important to him that he cares for her in her last days; and yet he avoids being in her company because he fears having the image with his mother because it would mean he was a bad and disgusting person. The content of obsessions, therefore, frequently represents the specific values and interests of the individual. They fear that if their thoughts became reality then their life would be devastated, and therefore all their energy is directed at preventing the harm from occurring.

Most of the examples above are obsessions to do with preventing harm in others. Obsessions are also commonly focused on preventing harm to yourself - for example, becoming ill or dying from a contaminant, or just feeling anxious about losing control and going crazy.

Sometimes it is difficult to work out how the content of your obsession relates to what is important in your life. It may just be self-preservation and not losing control or going crazy. Do not worry if you cannot work it out - sometimes it is very hard to articulate the meaning, and it may be helpful to talk it through with a therapist. If you avoid a great deal and have hardly *ever* resisted a compulsion (especially ordering and repeating), you will have become good at OCD that you never get sufficiently anxious to acknowledge explicitly what it is you fear. Here, it will be important for you to do an experiment to confront your fears, just to find out what is going through your mind and what your obsession is or means to you.

Adapted from: *Overcoming Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, 2nd Edition: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* by David Veale and Rob Willson (2021)