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# How to Better Support Your Loved Ones with OCD

By Sarah Jacobs

You see your son reposition the toilet paper from facing inwards to outwards every time they pass the bathroom. You notice he stops what he is doing to rearrange the closet that is unorganized. You wonder why he compulsively cleans the sink before each use. These depictions may not be concerning to some, but the sense of urgency to complete such tasks above all else can result in disruptions and frustrations to the family.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder [OCD] is characterized by having obsessions regarding intrusive thoughts, images, or urges and compulsions to mitigate anxiety and dread through rigid, ritualistic behaviors.<sup>2</sup> OCD presents itself in different ways from person to person, and these differences can pose various challenges in relationships.<sup>1</sup>

In all these scenarios, there are missed opportunities for connection. Rather than playing card games with the family, for example, someone with OCD is typically preoccupied with the carousel of thoughts, obsessions, and compulsions that can make having fun a little less fun. Instead of building relationships with family members through laughter and rapport, rigid routines and rituals get in the way of what's really important.



Even if it might seem like someone is adjusting well, they might be struggling more than what meets the eye. In order to mitigate this struggle, effective family support is crucial in the maintenance, treatment, and behavioral outcomes of those with OCD.<sup>3</sup>

## Why Families Are an Important Conduit for Change



Having a good social network, tools, and skills can help create a strong sense of self and purpose for those with OCD. Support from family members, as well as from others, is closely related to how a family works together as a whole. This interaction can have an impact on the course of action for treatment and be a source for change, not only for your family member with OCD, but also for your entire family. With this in mind, it's important to understand what you can do to effectively support someone you love who is struggling with OCD.

### Allow for Autonomous Decision Making

One of the ways parents negatively influence child decision making—as well as increase fear and anxiety in children—is by overprotecting and controlling them so as to not leave room for natural development of the child, otherwise known as helicopter parenting.

This parenting behavior could look like telling your child what to write for their essay in a class as your OCD child becomes paralyzed in trying to write it perfectly. In turn, controlling and accommodating the behavior and not providing autonomous learning experiences to occur.

Studies have shown that helicopter parenting doesn't teach kids how to make decisions on their own and tends to result in overcompensation in other areas. This parenting style can undermine self-confidence and threatens independence, causing more dependent behaviors in an individual with OCD. <sup>5</sup>

## Be Aware of the Accommodation Trap

It is a natural response for families to respond to distress by alleviating its surface cause, which is referred to as accommodation. OCD is a cyclical disorder of behaviors, thoughts, and compulsions and accommodation feeds that cycle by inadvertently reinforcing the disruptive patterns, even if it provides temporary relief. <sup>5</sup>

Some examples of accommodation include providing reassurance, allowing for avoidance, or removing triggers altogether. This behavior could look like your family member with OCD having a rigid shower schedule that doesn't allow for other members of the family to use the bathroom at certain times of the day.

Instead of wanting to solve the distress, recognize and appreciate them facing fears and sitting with discomfort. Be the one to model risk-taking by reasonably tolerating uncertainty.

With the shower situation, finding a solution can prove difficult because having routines and schedules are not inherently bad. However, attempting to relieve the rigid nature of the routines and can give your child a chance to deal with the discomfort associated with slightly disrupted routines in a supportive context. This could look like proposing blocks of times for shower use to provide some flexibility instead of a strict, consistent time.



In addition, be firm but empathetic. OCD is the bully here, so make it clear that you are on the side of your family member, not the OCD. This is uncomfortable and tricky for all parties to navigate, but that's okay!

Being able to communicate effectively and set appropriate boundaries can help to provide better support while still respecting the needs of the whole family.<sup>7</sup> Remember, the goal is to help and prevent, not enable and control.

## Boundaries in Family Time

Boundaries are the invisible lines that help describe how you expect to be treated and define what membership, hierarchies, roles, and rules look like in your specific family system. These boundaries should be clear yet flexible.

When we use tactics like accommodation in response to a loved-one with OCD, our boundaries can be blurred or overstepped at the cost of another.

Imagine you are trying to go on a date with your spouse, but your child is so anxious and dependent on your presence that you ultimately choose not to go. This boundary disturbance can come with potentially

adverse effects on your relationship as a couple and take a toll on other interests, values, and connections.

A healthy boundary might involve planning a date night with your spouse even if it is difficult to leave your more anxious child with OCD. Try making efforts to reduce some of the discomfort your child might feel. Empathize with the child's feelings while not giving into their desire for you to stay home. It's okay that it's diffi-



cult and probably uncomfortable for both you and your child!

OCD shouldn't rule you. Model brave behaviors and provide room for distress and anxiety to reside—but not control. Your child can develop more autonomy when you help by not dwelling on mistakes, acknowledging progress, and reiterating your role of support. Creating opportunities for closeness in your relationships within the family can help create an environment tolerant of change and true support as we feel more empowered to make autonomous decisions.

## How Can Families Support Professional Treatment

Professional treatment is typically the first line of defense in truly learning to live with OCD. Some common forms of professional treatment include, but are not limited to:

- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** This form of therapy focuses on the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physical reactions that can be experienced with OCD, which allows for more awareness, acceptance, and symptom relief. Becoming more in touch with their values, how they tackle the world, and their OCD puts people with OCD in the driver's seat, not the OCD.<sup>14</sup>
- **Exposure and Response Therapy:** This type of therapy helps in gradually exposing an individual with OCD to the stimuli they associate with OCD-inducing anxieties. In other words, they are attacking the trigger to combat the compulsion.<sup>14</sup>
- **Medication:** Another form of therapy is taking medication to help the brain rebalance its chemical signals to reduce OCD symptoms.<sup>14</sup>

With those professional avenues of treatment in mind, the family is the source of true change and support. No matter how much professional help an individual with OCD receives, the family is the most important

resource in implementing progress.

Here are some ways to augment your child's professional treatment:

- **Contact the professional to learn how to help at home:** Support begins in the home, which can include contacting and communicating with your child's therapist in appropriate ways. Be present with your child to help them complete their 'homework assignments' assigned by a professional. This can be an uncomfortable and what feels like a lonely road to tread, so be there with your child, and ask the professionals how you can be supportive in treatment.
- **See firsthand what the professional is doing and how that connects with you:** The family environment matters so much in terms of trying to help individuals with OCD. A good place to start is to attend a session of group therapy together. Being involved benefits everyone. As you gain more perspective, your capacity for understanding and compassion grows. There is risk in vulnerability, but with that risk comes the opportunity for deeper connection.
- **Educate yourself by reading articles like this for ideas and tips to help those you know with OCD:** Think of educating yourself as taking away the burden of having your family member with OCD be responsible for teaching you. Rather seek out information, bring what you learn to them, and see what connects to their situation. This process can potentially validate both you and your family, which in turn will strengthen your relationship and trust.

## Face the Future with Courage

As you come to better understand OCD, allow for autonomy, avoid accommodating compulsions, and maintain good boundaries, you can start to reclaim the family dynamics you desire.<sup>9</sup>

OCD involves the full social network of family and friends.<sup>12</sup> This process isn't meant to be easy, but it is meant to be a source of growth. Stretching can be uncomfortable, but by beginning with these tips and takeaways, you can help your family member with OCD navigate their experience, struggles, and triumphs and become resilient. Families are the true conduits for change, so be brave and be the change.

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