Background

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterized by a vicious cycle of unwanted thoughts or impulses (obsessions) and repeated mental rituals or behaviors (compulsions) intended to reduce the feelings of anxiety or dread caused by those thoughts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common obsessions:</th>
<th>Common compulsions:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Fear of contamination (dirt, germs, infections and communicable diseases)</td>
<td>• Excessive hand washing and cleaning; avoiding objects that may be contaminated</td>
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<td>• Doubting; fear of harm or danger (worried about harm coming to a loved one, pets)</td>
<td>• Checking and re-checking that locker is locked, light switches and other equipment are off; seeking reassurance that something has or has not happened.</td>
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<td>• Worries about evil, sin or religious guilt</td>
<td>• Assuring self that nothing bad will happen if engaged in a certain activity; repeating certain words, phrases or prayers.</td>
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<td>• Fear of loss (books, papers or other items seen as valuable)</td>
<td>• Hoarding objects so nothing of value will be lost</td>
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<td>• Need for symmetry (balancing or matching; exactness)</td>
<td>• Putting objects in a certain spot; placing things in a certain order; arranging objects in a certain pattern</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Need for perfection (fear of making mistakes; that things to be “perfect” or “done right”)</td>
<td>• Rethinking, revising or redoing homework; seeking reassurance that tasks have been done correctly</td>
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Obsessive-compulsive disorder in school-age children is considerably more common than once thought. Current estimates are that about 1% of children have OCD. This percentage translates into about three or four children in each elementary school and about 20 adolescents in a middle or high school. Researchers caution that this figure may be an underestimate; many children with OCD typically try very hard to hide their symptoms while at school so they can ‘blend in’ with their classmates.

OCD Symptoms in the Classroom

Although many children will experience times they may feel anxious, students with OCD experience difficulties that can interfere with social and academic functioning. Depression, agitation, difficulty paying attention, feelings of shame, stress and slow performance (due to the time-consuming rituals) may contribute to poor academic performance and difficulties with peer relationships. OCD symptoms tend to worsen when children are stressed, tired or ill. Some examples of how OCD symptoms may affect a child in the classroom include:

• Seeking reassurance from the teacher due to self-doubt and self-criticism of his or her efforts.
• Appearing inattentive because he or she is focused on an obsessive thought.
• Seems agitated because he or she wants to perform a compulsive behavior, but also wants to comply with classroom rules to stay seated.
• Doesn’t finish homework because he or she needs to cross-out, rewrite, or check and re-check work.
• Has trouble arriving on time because he or she needs to get ready for school in a certain way to avoid harm.
• Asks to leave the classroom to avoid certain activities, places, objects or persons.
Helping Students with OCD

Fortunately, OCD is manageable when educators and other school personnel are alert to the symptoms and know how to respond appropriately. For example, telling a student who has OCD to stop worrying or reassuring him that nothing bad will happen is ineffective and in fact may worsen the symptoms.

The strategies offered here are good starting places. In addition to helping students with OCD cope and succeed at school, they have the additional benefit of enhancing the learning experience of all students.

1. **Educate about anxiety**
   - Anxiety is normal – everyone experiences anxiety at times. It’s normal to feel anxiety before a big test or when trying a new activity. Research has shown that we perform our best at moderate levels of anxiety.
   - Anxiety is not dangerous – although anxiety may feel uncomfortable it does not last long and will eventually decrease.
   - Anxiety is adaptive – it helps us prepare for real danger. When we feel fearful or threatened, our bodies produce a “fight or flight” response. When there’s an actual need to run from danger or to physically fight to defend ourselves, this is a healthy response.
   - Anxiety can become a problem when our bodies react to normal situations as if they were real dangers. That’s why it is important for us to learn how to identify what’s causing the anxiety and to develop healthy coping strategies (see the “My Anti-Worry Plan” activity as an example).

2. **Partner with parents**
   Good communication between home and school is crucial. For example, it is beneficial to find out from parents:
   - How their child’s obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviors are interfering with overall functioning, and how they deal with OCD behaviors at home (to reinforce these strategies at school).
   - If they are aware of any teasing or problems with social relationships that may not be observable in the classroom setting so that appropriate interventions can be made.

3. **Establish a consistent classroom culture**
   A well-structured classroom with clear expectations, smooth transitions and a calm environment is helpful for most children, but particularly for the student with OCD.
   - Accommodate late arrivals (students with OCD are embarrassed about their time-consuming routines)
   - Frame rules positively (students with OCD often dwell on the negative) and repeat expectations often.
   - Establish predictable routines; if there is a change, provide as much notice ahead of time as possible.
   - Allow extra time for transitions between tasks (students with OCD frequently cannot begin a new task until completing the current task)
   - Offer a supportive environment where it’s okay to make mistakes, to express their emotions positively and to ask for help when needed.
   - Provide alternative activities for children with somatic complaints (i.e., stomachaches, headaches)
   - Have a “cue” or signal that the student with OCD may use to alert you that they need to go to a predetermined “safe” place if the student develops increased anxiety or panic attacks
"My Anti-Worry Plan” Activity

One important way to help children learn to tolerate anxiety is to give them tools they can use to recognize when they are worried and to challenge the story their mind is telling them about the situation. Once they recognize that their worry is just one way of thinking and that it can be challenged, they can come up with a plan to deal with it.

My Anti-Worry Plan

What am I worried or afraid about? ____________________________________________________________

How worried am I?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>A little bit</td>
<td>Worried</td>
<td>A lot!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How do we know that things will be OK? ____________________________________________________________

What can I do to help myself not worry so much? ____________________________________________________________

What can I do to help myself not worry so much? ____________________________________________________________

Is this something that I should worry about?  

Yes  

No

Why?  

__________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________