Navigating College With OCD: How to Find Success

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Overview

• Anonymous question cards
• Introductions
• Challenges and Skills for Students with OCD
• Working with Disability Services
• Accessing Treatment
• Q&A
Challenges and Skills For Students with OCD
Challenges

• Content of obsessions
• Transitioning to college
• Managing schedule/life independently
• Social
• Academic
Content of Obsessions

Obsessions may be triggered or come up for the first time in the new context of college, for example:

• Relationships
• Sex
• Appearance
• Failure and Perfectionism
• Scrupulosity
• Contamination
Transitioning to College

• Look into mental health resources before college starts
• Bring medical records to college counseling center or new provider
• Enroll with disability services as soon as possible (often can do this before arriving on campus)
• Plan but limit trips home
• Develop plan to limit phone calls for reassurance
  • Limit reassurance in general. Use exposure phrases.
Managing Schedule/Life Independently

• Sleep (find your meta)
• Time management
• Down time
Sleep

• Get at least 7-9 hours per night, more if taking sedating medications...even if you have early AM classes
• Go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day (works for some, but not all)
• Avoid naps longer than 45 minutes
• Avoid caffeine after dinner
• Have a nightly before-bed routine (not ritual!)
Time Management

• Use alarms and schedule on phone
• Walk to class with a friend (be accountable)
• Have scheduled meetings with professors or TA’s to decrease risk of procrastination
Down time

• Schedule blocks of time (or even one full day a week) OFF of school.
• Plan activities that keep the brain busy
• Explore new activities
• Learn mindfulness skills
• Exercise at least 75-150 minutes per week
Social

• Roommates
  • Consider single-resident housing on-campus
  • Discuss concerns with roommates (as comfortable)
  • Mediation with RA/campus ombuds/disability services as needed
Social (cont.)

• Feeling isolated
  • Online support
  • School clubs/organization – research in advance
  • Join local/campus chapter of Active Minds or NAMI
    • http://www.activeminds.org/
    • https://www.nami.org/
Social

• Stigma
  • Host an anti-stigma campaign
• Alcohol and Drugs
  ...make OCD worse
• Sex
  • Schedule meeting with campus health center to address questions related to sex
  • Peer counseling
Academic

- Ways that OCD interferes with studying and learning:
  - Feeling overwhelmed
  - Perfectionism and procrastination
  - Rereading
  - Rewriting
  - Being preoccupied by obsessive thoughts and rituals
  - Getting stuck on details/missing the big picture
  - Tendency to “overthink”
  - Problems with set-shifting (changing from task to task)
  - Fear of plagiarizing
Living an ERP Lifestyle

*Exposure and Response Prevention*: not just for scheduled therapy sessions

- Many of the issues listed on the previous slide may be managed using ERP.
  - Try to incorporate ERP into as many aspects of your academic life as possible.
  - E.g., assignments, dorm conflict, exams, living on your own, meeting with professors, etc.
Living an ERP Lifestyle (cont.)

• Exposures are unpleasant, but effective.
  • You may feel like the stress of school is too great for adding ERP
  • However, ERP is the strategy that will alleviate the most stress and anxiety over time
  • If you can make it over the initial hurdle of unpleasantness, the rewards are exponential.
Feeling Overwhelmed

School can sometimes feel like the only thing that is going on in your life. Here are some ways to take a step back:

• Engage in productive leisure
  • Have an activity to do outside of school work that gives you a finished project. E.g., coloring, painting, playing an instrument, cooking, crafting, sewing, scrapbooking, cake decorating, drawing, doodling, etc.

• Get outside
  • Sunshine (in moderation) can improve mood.

• Get moving
  • Exercise gives us free endorphins.
Feeling Overwhelmed (cont.)

• Have set times for work and play
  • Set time limits for work - and only work.
  • Set times for play and allow yourself to not think about work during this time.
• Develop good sleeping habits
  • Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
  • Shoot for 8 hours, even if you have to sacrifice other, less important things to get it.
Feeling Overwhelmed (cont.)

• Treat yourself with compassion
  • When you’re struggling, that’s okay! It’s normal to feel overwhelmed in college. Cut yourself some slack.

• Practice mindfulness
  • Being fully present in each moment. Engage your five senses.

• Seek outside help quickly
  • Don’t let warning signs fester. Go to extra therapy or get connected to resources at your school (more on this later)
Procrastination: Coping Response for Anxiety

Pre-preparation Anxiety
• The anxiety you feel before you start an assignment
• Can interfere with processing all the assignment requirements

Preparation Anxiety
• Overwhelms you as you try to work on an assignment
• Can get in the way of finding the sources or formulas you need

Evaluation Anxiety
• Fear of how your work (or you yourself) will be evaluated
• May discourage you from turning in assignments that aren’t perfect
Procrastination and Perfectionism

How can you cope?

• Call anxiety out for what it is: labeling it can take away some of its power
  • Expect that you will feel some anxiety over school work. Don’t let it surprise you.
• Use ERP to motivate you to get started.
  • Take your homework or assignments to your ERP sessions with your therapist - have her or him “grade” your work harshly; this will help you feel immune to judgement.
• Ask your professor for examples of “acceptable” and “good” assignments
Procrastination and Perfectionism (cont.)

• Do a “bad” draft first - acknowledge that your first draft will be imperfect. In fact, aim for imperfection.
• Schedule regular meetings with your professors or TA’s to track your progress.
  • They can help keep you accountable.
  • You can ask for smaller deadlines rather than one big one.
• Practice reverse scheduling
  • Mark on your calendar when an assignment is due.
  • Work your way backwards, assigning yourself small bits to do every day.
Procrastination and Perfectionism (cont.)

- Play with using *task time versus clock time*
  - Some days, commit to working until a particular task is complete
  - Other days, set a timer and work solid for that period of time
  - This can break up the monotony and allows you to set a variety of goals for yourself.
Preoccupation with Obsessions and Rituals

• Studying alone in room may not work so well
• Try different study environments
  • Distracting environments may be helpful for some
    • Distract from intrusive thoughts and limit ability to engage in rituals
      • Coffee shop, mall food court, etc.
• Listen to music
• Listen to motivational scripts
• Take a break, do an exposure, come back.
Re-reading/Re-writing

- Don't do it.
- Test yourself.
- Get help from a friend.
- Don’t freak out.
Set-shifting  (changing from task to task)

• Study different topics in different areas
• Study individual topics in larger blocks of time
• Work on projects in larger blocks of time
  • Take breaks (e.g. every 50 minutes)
  • Use apps (e.g. Focus Keeper or Clear Focus)
Getting stuck on details/missing the big picture/tendency to “overthink”

- Study with other students
- Meet with professors/TA’s
- Turn in drafts for feedback
- Meet with tutors
- Find out if reading the text is necessary – are lecture notes sufficient?
Disability Services and Accommodations

In this section, we will be discussing:

• Taking a medical leave of absence
• The American Disabilities Act and what it means for you
• Coping with discrimination or a privacy violation
• Registering with disability services
• Designing and requesting accommodations
Medical Leave of Absence

Throughout the course of your academic career, you might find it necessary to take a break from school to get intensive treatment or better cope with your OCD.

- Most universities have programs in which you can take time off without having to reapply when you return.
- Many universities allow students to remain on their health insurance plans - check out your school for their rules.
- Don’t be afraid to utilize this option - taking a break does not mean you’re not going back.
The American Disabilities Act

The purpose of this 1990 act was to “provide a clear and comprehensive mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities.”

- OCD is a protected disability (per the ADA Amendment Act of 2008)
- You have the right to equal access to education.
- You have the right to privacy - you do not have disclose your disability to any professor, advisor, or administrator.
The American Disabilities Act (cont.)

• Your disability may not be factored in when it comes to university employment or admission.
• You have the right to be treated like an individual without a disability.
Coping with discrimination or privacy violation

- ADA Compliance Office
  - Conducts investigations into instances of discrimination, harassment, and breach of law or university policy
- Office of Victim’s Assistance
  - Provides counseling, information, support and advocacy when you have been the victim of a bias-motivated incident
Registering with Disability Services

There are typically two different departments at a university that deal with disabilities: the ADA Office and Disability Services.

• Visit the ADA Office (or university Human Resources) if you are employed by the university, even for a work study or assistantship job.
• Register with the Disability Services department for issues and accommodations related to your position as a student.
Registering with Disability Services (cont.)

• The purpose of registering with the Disability Services department is to:
  • Have on record the details of your disability and needs as a student
  • Seek help and advice for dealing with a disability
  • Arrange for accommodations
• First, discuss with your healthcare provider what accommodations you might need and secure documentation from her or him (more on this later).
Registering with Disability Services (cont.)

• Find your university’s website on how to register for disability services. Each school is a little bit different.
• When you visit the disability office, you can share with your disability officer about your disability; they are required to keep this information confidential.
• She or he will provide you with a list of accommodations to give to your professor.
• You are NOT required to disclose the nature of your disability to your professor; only the accommodations list, even if they ask.
University Accommodations

What are the purposes of disability accommodations?

• To provide equal access for otherwise-qualified students to instruction, materials, and evaluation
• To minimize the impact of a disability on a student’s academic performance
• They must be “reasonable.”
  • They shouldn’t provide an unfair advantage
  • They do not guarantee success
“Reasonable” Accommodations

What constitutes a “reasonable” accommodation?
• Doing the same work as the rest of the class
  • Exams
  • Assignments - meeting the regular criteria
  • Regular attendance

• Healthy for you
  • Some accommodations may be enabling OCD rather than accommodating for its treatment
“Reasonable” Accommodations, cont.

• Endorsed by your health care providers
  • When in doubt, ask your therapist or psychiatrist what they recommend for you - they know you well.
  • They will also be able to guide you in what accommodations might be healthy for you.

• Get creative!
  • The disability services at your college or university will usually have a list of standard accommodations - you are not restricted to this list.
  • You may have to educate them and let them know what you need.
Examples of reasonable accommodations:

- Extended time on exams (being careful that this does not enable perfectionism or ritualizing)
- Reduced-distraction testing environment
- Allowed to take breaks from class for short periods of time
- Time off for doctor’s appointments/a schedule that allows for therapy or group
- Reduced semester course load
- Scheduled meetings (weekly, biweekly, etc.) with professors to discuss progress and maintain accountability
“Reasonable” Accommodations (cont.)

• Having a note taker
• Permission to record lectures/having someone else record lectures for you
• Flexible/extended deadlines (again, be careful with this one, as it can enable procrastination or perfectionism)
• Single room on-campus living
Un“reasonable” Accommodations

• Not being required to take exams
• Allowed to miss required class or lectures on a regular basis
• Not being required to complete assignments

Unhealthy Accommodations:
• Those which enable OCD (e.g., breaks to wash hands, a desk next to the Purell dispenser, a study buddy to re-check homework, computer access during class to reference religious texts, leaving class to make sure you locked your car, etc.)
Documentation Guidelines

For Psychiatric/Psychological Disabilities
College Counseling Center (CCC)

PROS
• Trained in development of young adults/college students
• Aware of campus resources, can easily access
• Often cheaper than paying community provider out-of-pocket
• Often don’t need to use insurance
• Often have after-hours emergency services
• Convenient
CONS
• May limit # of sessions
• May have wait list
• May not have expertise in treating OCD
Community Provider

PROS

• May have expertise in treating OCD
• May be able to seen longer (depending on insurance/ability to pay)
• May provide more privacy for student
Community Provider

CONS

• May not be familiar with university/campus resources
• May not be trained in development of young adults/college students
• May require additional travel time
• May be more expensive
How to Receive Services Through CCC

• Go early! CCCs often have wait lists of at least a couple of weeks; don’t wait until the last minute to make an appointment

• Review CCC’s website to see if they offer what you are looking for

• Contact CCC to discuss what you are looking for

• Ask to be assigned to provider who has experience working with OCD

• Attend intake appointment
How to Receive Services Through CCC (cont.)

• Be honest about symptoms/history
• Express any concerns you have to your provider
• Ask about switching providers if you feel you are not getting appropriate treatment
• Follow through on homework assignments and practice in between sessions
Procedure for Attending Cal Poly Counseling Services

• Students are required to make their own appointments; surrogates/representatives may not make appointments for them.

• Student calls Counseling Services to make an appointment, is assigned counseling based on availability/preference (student must state this).

• Students meets with Clinician for 50-minute appointment.

• Clinician determines if student’s needs can be met at Counseling Services.
Procedure for Attending Cal Poly Counseling Services (cont.)

• Treatment options are provided
  • Short-term individual counseling (3-4 sessions is average)
  • Group counseling
  • Psychoeducational workshops
  • Referral to off-campus providers
Procedure for Attending University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus Student Mental Health

- 4084 students
- 2 psychiatrists, 1.4 advanced practice nurses, 0.6 LCSW, 1 psychologist
- Insurance based clinic
- School sponsored insurance – unlimited mental health visits with no copay
Procedure for Attending University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus Student Mental Health

• Network of community providers
• Walk-in hours available
• Student Mental Health track in the Emergency Department
How to Find a Community Provider

• Insurance company: Ask for list of providers in the area who specialize in OCD

• Databases: IOCDF, Psychology Today

• College Counseling Center
  • Many have referral lists (online or in print) of community clinics/private practice providers (including low and sliding scale fee)
Self-Help Books


Online Support Groups

• General Support
  https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/OCD-Support/info

• OCD Self-Help: A Working Group Using CBT
  https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/OCD-Selfhelp/info

• Pure O
  https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/pure_o_ocd/info
Online Support Groups (cont.)

• Serenity Bay (Christian/Scrupulosity)
  https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/serenitybay/info

• Cats and OCD
  https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/OCD-cat/info

• Laughing Club for OCD Patients
  https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/laughing_club/info
Phone Support Groups

• Obsessive-Compulsive Anonymous
  http://www.obsessivecompulsiveanonymous.org/?q=node/1

• Obsessive Compulsive Addicts Anonymous (Men Only)
  http://www.ocaaprogram.org/

• Hair Pullers Anonymous
  http://www.hpanonymous.org/Meetings.html
Final Thoughts

Psychologist Angela Duckworth has found one consistent predictor of success in both students and professionals: *grit*.

• Those who set long-term goals and pursue them with perseverance and passion are the ones who reach them.
Final Thoughts

• What does grit look like with OCD?
  • Keep moving forward despite relapses, obstacles, and setbacks.
    • Because they *will* happen. Expect them.
  • Your academic journey might look messy - that’s okay.
  • Show up when you don’t feel like it.
  • Keep going back even if you are uncomfortable.
  • Revel in the hard times - they are making you stronger to finish the race.