



## School Mental Health Communities of Practice

### *Micro-Skills to Support K-12 Students with Obsessive Thoughts and Compulsive Behaviors*

#### **Signs and Symptoms of Obsessive Thoughts and Compulsive Behaviors:**

Having to think about or say something over and over again (e.g., repeatedly counting silently or out loud, or repeating words over and over silently or out loud)	Having unwanted thoughts, impulses, or images that occur over and over again and which cause uncomfortable feelings, anxiety, or distress	Feeling compelled to do something over and over again according to certain rules that must be followed exactly in order to make an obsession go away
Having to do something over and over (e.g., handwashing, placing things in a specific order, or checking an answer over and over)	Having unwanted thoughts about shouting obscenities or acting inappropriately that make you feel anxious, uncomfortable, or distressed	Having thoughts or images of hurting yourself or someone else that are unwanted and make you uncomfortable, anxious, or distressed
Having a fear of contamination or dirt	Compulsively washing and cleaning things	Needing things to be orderly and symmetrical
Having unwanted (and sometimes aggressive) thoughts about sexual or religious subjects	Having a fear of being contaminated (or made dirty) by touching objects others have touched	Having doubts that you remembered to do something (e.g., lock the door or turn off the stove)
Feeling physical distress, anxiety, or fear when routines are not followed	Having aggressive or horrific thoughts about harming yourself or others	Having intense stress when objects are not orderly or facing a certain way
Avoiding situations that can trigger obsessions, such as shaking hands	Feeling distress about unpleasant sexual images repeating in your mind	Feeling compelled to start assignments over and over again until they are perfect
Following a strict schedule	Demanding reassurances	Needing things to be perfect
Silently repeating a prayer, word, or phrase	Having intrusive and repeated thoughts	Checking doors repeatedly to make sure they are locked



## Action Steps (Micro-Skills) When You Recognize the Signs and Symptoms:

- **Educate students about how to recognize signs and symptoms in themselves and how to ask for help when they experience obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors:** It is important for students to understand the signs and symptoms of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors so that they can accurately identify these concerns when they experience them. It is also important for students who experience obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors to know how to reach out for help.
  - Use universal education approaches (e.g., Tier 1) to educate groups of students about the general signs and symptoms of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. These general approaches, which should be developmentally appropriate to the age/grade of the students, can occur in a general education class setting (typically facilitated by a teacher or co-facilitated by a teacher and school-based mental health professional) or in specialized social-emotional-learning sessions (typically facilitated by a school-based mental health professional). Students should be given general information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
  - Use targeted education approaches (e.g., Tier 2) to educate students at risk of experiencing obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Typically, this would entail small group sessions led by a school-based mental health professional and would include more detailed information about signs and symptoms, along with specific coping strategies that students could use to prevent and/or reduce concerns. Students should be given specific information about who to go to and how to receive help, should they need it.
  - Use individualized education approaches (e.g., Tier 3) to educate students who are known to be experiencing obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Typically, this would occur through individual counseling sessions provided by a school-based mental health professional and would include student-specific information about signs and symptoms, along with student-specific strategies to mitigate those concerns. Students should be given information about additional sources of help (e.g., crisis lines, community-based providers) in case they need support at a time that their school-based mental health professional is not available. Teachers and school-based mental health professionals should regularly consult about how to best support students with obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors while they are at school.
- **Recognize when students may be triggered by the environment during school:** Students who have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors may be more hypersensitive to the environment around them compared to students who have not experienced obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Dirty restrooms, crowded spaces, and demanding academic experiences (e.g., testing, group projects) may cause students who have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors to be triggered.



- Understand that situations during school may make obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors more likely to occur. For example, a student with a fear of contamination will find it difficult to be in a dirty restroom or around other people who are coughing and sneezing without becoming symptomatic. Similarly, a student who feels compelled to perform perfectly on academic assignments may become symptomatic when work is challenging or when the environment is too distracting to focus on work (e.g., loud classmates, many activities happening at once, group projects, high-stress situations).
- Support students who have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. It is important for adults at school to recognize the signs and symptoms of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors and to offer support and understanding to students who experience them.
- Help students who are experiencing obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors to feel more 'in control' of their lives. It can be helpful for students to keep regular schedules and routines. Regular routines, clear expectations, and predictable transitions during school can make things feel orderly and predictable and help to prevent a student from being triggered.
- **Help students find coping strategies when they experience obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors:** It may be very overwhelming and difficult for students to cope with the strong emotions that triggering events can bring up. It can be helpful to identify the situations that are most likely to cause symptoms and encourage students to use coping strategies during school (and at home) to cope with those triggers.
  - Teach students coping strategies, including how to challenge the obsessive thoughts (e.g., "making mistakes helps me learn new things" or "I can try new ways of doing things") and how to resist acting on the compulsions (e.g., "my hands are already clean" or "I know I already locked the door").
  - Teach students who are experiencing obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors how to use relaxation techniques to calm down/slow down the intense feelings and emotions they are experiencing. Relaxation techniques include strategies like deep breathing (taking three deep, slow breaths while breathing in for a count of three and out for a count of three); muscle relaxation (squeezing a muscle tightly for a count of three, then releasing all the tension and focusing on the sense of relief/calm); and the mindfulness grounding exercise (name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste).
  - Help students create their own calming/coping toolbox. Items that might be helpful in a calming/coping toolbox include stress balls, kaleidoscope, piece of tactile fabric, smooth stone, scented play dough, chewing gum, bottle of bubbles, MP3 player loaded with relaxing music, photo of a loved one/message from a loved one, or relaxation prompt cards/positive affirmation cards. It is important to include things that are meaningful and helpful for that specific



student, as not all of these items will be helpful for all students.

- Teach students to use distraction techniques when they notice signs and symptoms in order to move their attention away from that uncomfortable experience. Distraction techniques include strategies like thinking of their favorite things (e.g., being with their pet, walking on a beach, eating their favorite food, listening to birds sing), squeezing something (e.g., stress ball), counting (e.g., counting to 100 slowly, counting backwards, counting your breaths, counting your steps), or doing something else (e.g., exercising, yoga, reading, journaling, playing a game, doing a puzzle, taking a walk).
- **Use micro-skills daily in class and during school to support students who have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors:** Students who experience obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors can benefit from being in a supportive class and school environment.
  - Modify students' seating arrangements, if necessary. For example, if students are triggered by noise, move them to a less noisy area of the classroom. For students who have very observable symptoms and do not want other students to see them, it can be helpful to move them toward the back of the room (behind other students).
  - Provide extended time for tests and assignments for students who have symptoms of perfectionism (e.g., students who need to find the perfect way to say something will need more time to finish essay questions or papers).
  - Allow students who are writing, rewriting, and erasing responses often to use a laptop/computer for their work and/or for taking notes (instead of handwriting their assignments).
  - Provide students who have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors with a quiet place away from other students, as this will allow them to do better, be less overwhelmed, and feel more in control of their thoughts and their reactions (especially during important work and/or testing).
  - Allow students who feel compelled to read perfectly the option to skip reading out loud in front of the class. These students may have to go back and reread sentences or whole paragraphs over and over to make sure they have read those correctly (making read-alouds difficult). Additionally, it can be helpful for these student to listen to the books on tape (instead of reading themselves).
  - Break assignments into smaller chunks to help students with obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors stay focused on doing the work instead of getting lost in their symptoms (e.g., perfectionism).
- **Advocate for students to visit a mental health professional, if needed:** If symptoms become overwhelming, it may be important for students to visit a mental health professional to help alleviate their symptoms and identify coping strategies that work for them. School professionals can share referral information with students and their families about options for mental health treatment at school or in the local community.