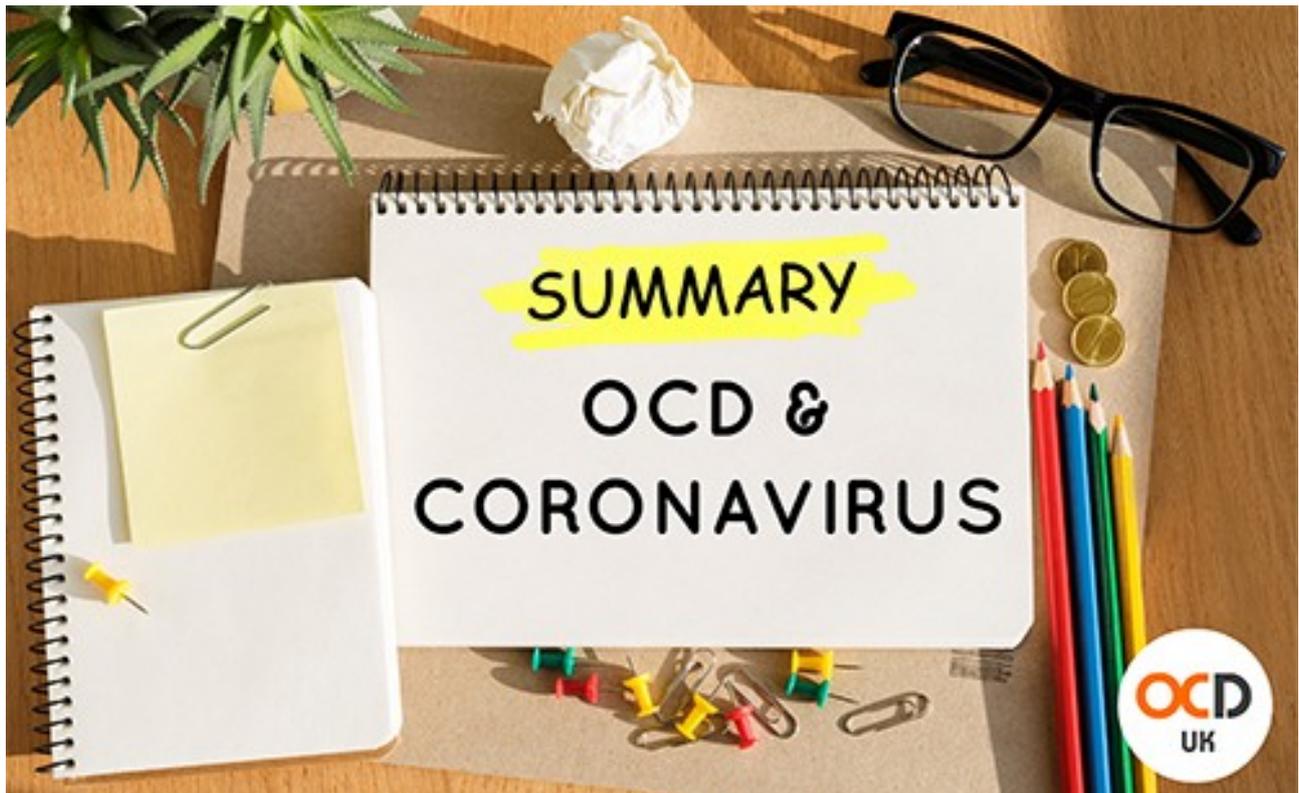


# OCD and coronavirus (COVID-19) – Summary

Summary of how coronavirus is impacting on people living with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)



Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (or more routinely referred to as OCD) is a serious anxiety-related condition where a person experiences frequent intrusive and unwelcome thoughts, commonly referred to as [obsessions](#). Obsessions are unwanted intrusive thoughts, images, impulses or feelings, that bring someone's attention to a threat or perceived danger, hence why they are so horrible and distressing. Obsessions result in a person carrying out repetitive behaviours or rituals, called [compulsions](#), in order to prevent this perceived danger or threat. Unfortunately, instead of solving the problem, compulsions cause additional anxiety and obsessions, resulting in even more time-consuming and mentally draining compulsions. [Read more about OCD here.](#)

OCD impacts on people in many shapes and guises, from obsessive fears around germs and contamination to unwanted and distressing intrusive thoughts about harming a loved one, perhaps violently or sexually. The

present global public health crisis around coronavirus (COVID-19) has led to a number of additional worries for those affected by Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. This is a list of some of the main areas of concerns users are reporting:

- Contamination fears leading to additional washing/cleaning
- Intrusive thoughts around passing virus on to loved ones / elderly
- Harm related obsessions such as; 'Have I been careless? Does this mean I secretly want people to die?'
- Increase in health anxiety/worrying about being more vulnerable
- Worries about not being able to do exercise for mental well-being if isolated

It's important to highlight that all of the above are normal worries that will cause anxiety for many people even for those without OCD, but of course for people with OCD everyday normal worries can create additional anxiety and anguish.

For people without OCD much of these worries will be fleeting and will certainly pass once the present public health crisis passes. Likewise the extra hand washing is not worry driven, people are simply following recommended advice, even if it is slightly anxiety provoking.

Try to remember it's perfectly normal for people to wash their hands to minimise the risk of a highly contagious virus, it is a normal rational response to a genuine and significant threat. But when that hand washing becomes extreme, then the safety seeking behaviour is arguably causing more harm than the virus itself.

Most people will not be worrying if they've washed their hands sufficiently once the tap stops. Which is why this is not OCD behaviour and why people claiming they're 'a little bit OCD' about hand washing remains as inaccurate and inappropriate as ever.

By comparison for someone with OCD the worries are not fleeting and create significant anxiety that lasts long after the initial intrusive thoughts, long after the taps are turned off and will impact on their ability to function for hours or even an entire day. For some the impact of COVID-19 will last long after the public health crisis passes.

## **Will everybody with OCD be struggling now?**

In terms of beyond the general worry the entire population has, then no, not at all. Some people's OCD is severely affected by coronavirus, but as listed above, OCD is complex and affects people in a variety of ways, and not all with OCD will be affected with worries that lead to excessive washing compulsions. What we are discovering is that at the moment those of us living with OCD that are affected are generally falling into two categories, and each face their own unique challenges.

### **Group 1**

Those currently receiving therapy and/or have had therapy and are making good progress along the recovery journey:

- Worries about being able to even attend therapy
- Where is the line between what is common sense to protect ourselves and what is an OCD compulsion?
- How do I challenge my OCD when I am being asked to do rituals therapy suggested I shouldn't engage with?
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### **Group 2**

Those yet to receive any kind of therapy, or those where therapy is yet to be effective:

- No therapy input at this time to turn to for help in these challenging times
- Have no alternative strategies in place to challenge regular OCD, without the added extreme level of anxiety brought on by COVID-19

Short term the charity advises people to follow the public health advice, and if at all possible do not allow OCD to take you beyond what is recommended. However, if your anxiety and OCD dictate that, be kind to yourself, do not feel guilty for going beyond the recommended advice at this time, what we can do is once the crisis passes is ensure we come back to focus on challenging our OCD at a later date. The charity and other resources are there to offer advice and support when we can, and in due course we can all work together to ensure we all receive access to helpful and effective treatment.

# OCD and Coronavirus Survival Tips

If you're like us, the last thing you want to do is read yet another article or social media post about the coronavirus outbreak (or to give it the official name, COVID-19), but the ongoing public health concerns around the coronavirus outbreak have left many people with OCD (and without) extremely anxious and distressed, something [Ashley blogged](#) about earlier last week.

## OCD and Coronavirus Survival Tips

Because of the increased media coverage, much of which is unhelpful, we wanted to share some practical suggestions to help you cope and survive the ongoing situation. Our survival tips are to help you differentiate between the recommended public health advice for this virus and OCD induced behaviours, but also to help you combine therapeutic steps whilst engaging in these recommended behaviours.

- **20 seconds, and not a second longer!**
- The advice from health professionals is to be careful not to touch our face and regularly wash our hands for 20 seconds. We know that this gives the OCD monster the perfect motive to come crashing in and try to disrupt all the hard work you have put in during recovery. So here's where you can still stay in control of the bully. You must **ONLY** wash your hands as frequently as the health professionals tell you to, and only for 20 seconds. We know all too well how it feels to hear that bully voice in your brain saying, 'just one more time' or 'just a few seconds longer'. Before we know it, its escalated to five times, 5 minutes per time. Remember the limits and stick to them... you CAN do this.
- **Be kind to yourself**
- Despite our suggestion above, there will be times when OCD gets the better of us. So if 20 seconds does become 30 or even 60 seconds occasionally, or if you do send a text to a loved one for reassurance, it's ok, don't beat yourself up. It's vitally important that we remember to be kind to ourselves by showing ourselves the same compassion we show to others. Be honest with yourself (about the OCD work needed), but be compassionate. Have your targets (i.e. 20 seconds), aim for them, but don't beat yourself up for the occasional miss.

- **Challenge your OCD in other ways**
- For some people behavioural exercises have taken a diversion, so it's important to be mindful of other ways we can keep on top of things. If there are other behavioural exercises you can be working on, which stay in line with health advice on COVID-19, do them.
- **Don't allow OCD to dictate self-isolation**
- Whilst respecting the recommended social distancing, it's important we only actually isolate if we have genuine symptoms of COVID-19 or have been officially recommended to. This is where it gets tricky for OCD sufferers, because as we know all too well OCD likes to play tricks on us. It is no secret that when someone with OCD is fixating on an obsession, it can cause physical sensations in the body. You might notice harmless physical sensations, worry what they are and before we know it, we are panicked. That inevitably causes shortness of breath which convinces us we have coronavirus. Remember your therapy techniques!

- **Limit yourself to time spent on social media**

We are all guilty of it. Whenever you get a spare second you flick through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. However, at the moment there's more scaremongering than ever. The general media are also not helping, they are desperately relying on clickbait to sell headlines and it's working. Limit yourself on how long you spend on social media, delete notifications if you need to and focus on the real facts.

Information can be (non-OCD) reassuring provided it's rooted in facts. Educate yourselves with real factual evidence and ignore articles with fake news. Good examples for factual information are [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk), [NHS111](https://111.nhs.uk) and the [BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news).

- **Protect mental well-being - Don't be afraid to mute / unfollow / block / unfriend**

Even during normal times it's important when challenging OCD that we surround ourselves with positivity and limit the amount of negative influences in our lives. This is so important now more than ever! Don't be afraid to mute or unfollow news outlets or people that push more negativity than positivity into your timeline. Unfollowing someone is not always easy to do, but do what is right for your mental well-being.

- **You can still do therapy**

- I have coronavirus, I have coronavirus, I have coronavirus, I have coronavirus. Be your own therapist, think about exercises that you can do, like getting used to the thought. Put a sign on your door; 'I have coronavirus' and help your OCD get used to the thought... we don't have to like the thought, we don't want the thought to become a reality, we just have to accept the thought without reaching for the soap.
- You can still....
- Social media and the newspapers are full of what you can't do, so it may be helpful to remember what is still possible, even if you have to self-isolate.

**You can still:** Listen to your favourite music

**You can still:** Talk and Skype family and friends

**You can still:** Read your favourite book/s

**You can still:** Enjoy the outdoors, even if it's your own garden in the short term

**You can still:** Sing or dance at home (even if both are best behind closed doors!)

**You can still:** Smile and laugh (don't let OCD stop either, it will try, we don't have to let it stop us smiling or laughing)

**You can still:** Watch your favourite TV or films (we recommend the fun, laugh out loud variety!)

**You can still:** Have **HOPE** for a life without OCD (even if that comes after this public health crisis)