OCD cycle

Map one episode. An unwanted thought is not an action or intention. Include mental rituals.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

Trigger

What set the episode off?

e.g. Leaving home.

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Unwanted thought, image, urge or doubt

e.g. What if the cooker is still on?

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Meaning I gave it

What did it seem to say about risk or responsibility?

e.g. If I miss something, any harm will be my fault.

↓

Distress and urge to act

What did I feel I had to do?

e.g. Anxious; feel I must check until I am completely sure.

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Compulsion or avoidance

Visible rituals, mental rituals or reassurance

e.g. Check again; mentally replay checking the cooker.

↓

Effect now and later

Brief relief, returning doubt or other effects

e.g. Relief for a moment; then doubt returns.



The return arrow shows how rituals may keep the feared meaning or need for certainty going.

An episode map informed by Salkovskis (1985); not the full developmental model.

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Using this resource

OCD cycle

What this helps with

OCD is not defined simply by the topic of an unwanted thought. What you believe the thought means, and what you feel driven to do about it, matter too. Checking, seeking reassurance, repeating or mentally putting something right may bring relief but leave the demand for certainty intact. This map helps you and your therapist make sense of one recent episode. It is a starting point for assessment and planning, not a test of whether your thoughts are acceptable.

How to use it

1. Use a brief label for one trigger; no detailed disclosure is needed.
2. Add the unwanted thought, image, urge or doubt, then the meaning you gave it. A thought is not proof of risk or intention.
3. Describe distress and the urge to act, followed by compulsions or avoidance. Include mental reviewing and reassurance.
4. Write what changed immediately and later. Follow the return arrow: did relief fade or the need for certainty return?
5. Use the map with your therapist to choose a treatment focus. Avoid repeatedly completing it to prove you are safe or a good person.

A fictional worked example

After sending an ordinary email, Maya has the thought that she may have typed something offensive without noticing. She interprets the possibility as a responsibility to be completely certain. She rereads the message, remembers each sentence and asks her partner whether she is a considerate person. Relief lasts a few minutes before another doubt appears about an attachment. Her map shows that the repeated reviews offer short-term relief while making certainty feel increasingly necessary. The therapy question is how she can respond differently to the recurring doubt, not how to prove every future email can never contain a mistake.

Keep in mind

Keep descriptions brief and private. If completing the map becomes repeated checking or a search for reassurance, stop and discuss that pattern with your therapist. Ordinary unwanted thoughts occur outside OCD too; diagnosis and assessment require the wider clinical picture.

Sources and attribution

Salkovskis, P. M. (1985). Obsessional-compulsive problems: A cognitive-behavioural analysis. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 23, 571-583.

NICE (2005). Obsessive-compulsive disorder and body dysmorphic disorder: treatment (CG31).

Original material informed by the sources above. No outside organisation endorses this worksheet.

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