

The Odd Couple, Indeed: OCD and ADHD In Contrast

Jack Nicholson in "As Good As It Gets" or Leonardo DiCaprio in "The Aviator" — for too many people, these extreme examples epitomize OCD. But the reality is that Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is seldom so easy to recognize and distinguish from other conditions like ADHD. Here are key distinctions.

by the editors of ADDitude

What is OCD?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a neurological and behavioral condition characterized by recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors (compulsions). While OCD is sometimes misdiagnosed as ADHD due to symptom overlap, it is possible to have both disorders. In fact, as many as 30–50 percent of people with ADHD also have related, comorbid conditions (such as OCD).

Common Obsessions

Obsessions can take the form of repetitive words, thoughts, fears, worries, memories, or pictures. Some common obsessions include fear of dirt, germs, or becoming ill/dying; fear of losing control and causing harm to oneself or others; perverse or forbidden sexual thoughts; and the extreme need for order, symmetry, or “perfection.” An OCD individual may view their obsessions as being extreme or unnecessary, yet still feel like they cannot be controlled or stopped.

Common Compulsions

People with OCD often take part in compulsive rituals in an attempt to calm their obsessive thoughts. Common compulsions include excessively cleaning, bathing, or washing hands; refusing to shake hands or touch door knobs; repeatedly touching, counting, or rearranging objects; excessively checking alarms, locked doors, or unplugged fixtures; hoarding; and perfectionism. Although doing these rituals provides only temporary relief, not doing them can dramatically increase anxiety.

OCD Is Not...

The occasional worry about getting sick or the desire to keep things clean and orderly does not indicate an obsession — everyone has these thoughts from time to time. Additionally, not all repetitive behaviors, rituals, or routines point to compulsions — in fact, a daily routine can be quite beneficial for those with ADHD. It's only OCD when repetitive thoughts or behaviors **interfere with day-to-day life**.

Who Is Affected?

It is estimated that OCD affects more than 2 million people in the United States. Although OCD can be found in individuals of any age, according to the International OCD Foundation, OCD most commonly presents itself in individuals between ages 8-12 years old and between late teens and early adulthood.

Causes of OCD

While the exact causes of OCD are largely unknown, it is believed that obsessive-compulsive behavior results from a deficiency of a neurotransmitter, serotonin, in specific areas of the brain. New research suggests that the more severe forms of the condition, in which obsessive thoughts “lock” and cannot be relieved, involve more than a neurotransmitter shortfall. There may also be a genetic component to OCD.

Diagnostic Difficulties

OCD is easily confused with ADHD due to overlapping behavioral symptoms. For example, a child may seem inattentive because he has trouble completing schoolwork; however, the problem may actually stem from the child being so fearful of making a mistake that he is unable to move on to the next task. Determining the root of behavior problems is the key to a proper diagnosis.

OCD Treatment

If you believe that you or your child may have ADHD and OCD, it is recommended that you see a professional who specializes in treating patients with more than one disorder. OCD is typically treated with a combination of therapy and a non-stimulant medication, such as an SSRI, which increases serotonin levels in the brain.

OCD and Stimulant Medication

For reasons that are not known, stimulant medications, often used to treat ADHD, may exacerbate an existing case of OCD. Often, the first clue that someone has ADHD and OCD – or may have OCD rather than ADHD – is a significant increase in OCD behaviors after taking a stimulant medication. Once OCD symptoms are under control, a stimulant can often be reintroduced without causing a flare-up of the OCD behaviors.

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