OCD and Coronavirus Survival Tips

NSFT Recovery College has teamed up with OCD-UK to create a worksheet with five top tips on staying safe from COVID-19—without letting the OCD monster take over.

1. 20 seconds, and not a second longer!

The advice from health professionals is to avoid touching your face and regularly wash your hands for 20 seconds.

Ashely, from OCD-UK, says: "The Coronavirus gives the OCD monster a perfect opportunity to disrupt all the hard work I've put in during recovery."

"The bully in my brain says, 'just one more time' or 'just a few seconds longer', and before I know it, I'm washing my hands five times, five minutes per time, or longer."

"Here's what I do to stay in control of the bully: I wash my hands as frequently as the health professionals tell me to, but only once, and only for 20 seconds."

"I set limits and stick to them…and remind myself, I CAN do this."

What limits will I set myself?
Decide: When should I wash my hands and how long for?

2. Be kind to yourself

There are times when OCD gets the better of us. Don't beat yourself up if you can't stick to 20 seconds.

Ashely, from OCD-UK: "It's important I'm honest with myself about the work I need to do to manage my OCD but treat myself kindly while I do it. I set myself a target (i.e. 20 seconds to wash my hands), but I don't beat myself up for the occasional miss."

Ken, NSFT service user: "When things don't go according to plan, I take a deep breath and try some relaxation exercises. That switches me back into neutral and lifts my mood, which helps me deal with delays in completing my schedule."

"I also take regular breaks to do something I enjoy, like watching TV, reading and knitting. I tell myself I'm doing my best, and that's all I can do."

Ways I can be kind to myself…

3. Challenge your OCD in other ways

If you can't use your normal coping strategies, it's important to find different ways to manage. If there are other behavioural exercises you can be working on, which stay in line with health advice on COVID-19, do those.

Sophie, trainee Recovery College Tutor, says:

"I had a busy routine that took me away from the house at least twice a week, but now I'm home I've had to find new ways to cope."

"A routine helps keep me focused. We have set wake and sleep times, meals times, timed cleaning sessions, and school time with the children, including home exercise."

"I also have new 'in the moment' techniques for when those blips happen. I made a craft space on my dining table, with lots of things to keep my hands busy: paint, pens, sewing, books. I also have a little collection of sweet treats to lift my mood."

"My biggest OCD behaviour is picking my fingers and thumbs. If I get anxious the behaviour spirals. I found a bead bracelet and a spinner ring on the internet. Fiddling with these stops me picking, and now my hands have healed up nicely."

Ways I can challenge my OCD…

4. Don't let OCD trick you into thinking you are ill.

It's easy for OCD-driven thoughts to run away with us. Remember, you're only likely to have coronavirus if you have a temperature and a new persistent cough. Even then, most cases are mild and don't need hospital treatment.

Ashely, from OCD-UK: "This is where it gets difficult because OCD likes to play tricks on me. When I get fixated on an obsession, it causes physical sensations in my body and Bam! Panic! I can't breathe! That naturally convinces me I have coronavirus."

Ken: "When I had a headache, I got anxious it might be a COVID-related symptom. But I hung on in there and took a breath. The next day I was headache free and realised it was unlikely to be coronavirus."

Sophie has two methods of dealing with runaway thoughts:

"I write the thoughts down. Then, or later, I pick apart what they've said, almost like deciphering a puzzle. I find the bullying voices are my own worries! Knowing that, I can acknowledge what they are saying but then move on with my day."

"Secondly, I reach out to people around me, one to one or on the phone. I talk about how I feel and ask them to help me refocus my thoughts and assure me that my feelings are a normal response to extremely tense times. I try to be kind to myself as we are all fighting this together."

Ways I can deal with runaway thoughts…

5. Limit 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, if you find yourself endlessly scrolling through viral-related threads, limit how long you spend on social media, delete notifications if you need to and focus on the real facts.

Ashely from OCD-UK: "I find that information can be reassuring provided it's rooted in facts. I educate myself with evidence and ignore fake news. Good examples for factual information are gov.uk, NHS111 and the BBC News."

"I mute or unfollow news outlets or people that push more negativity than positivity into my timeline. Unfollowing someone is not always easy, but right now I need to do what's right for my mental well-being."

Ken, NSFT Service user: "I avoid places like Twitter or Facebook, where views seem sensationalised. I know bad news sells. I keep informed through the BBC and limit myself to watching the main news and coronavirus update."

How I'm going to limit unhelpful information…

Remember…it's tough, but you can beat the bully!

Link to OCD-UK - www.ocduk.org