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## Reassurance and Uncertainty in OCD and PTSD

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Reassurance seeking is a common behavior among people who have OCD and/or PTSD. It can take many forms, some more obvious than others. Obvious reassurance seeking behaviors include asking questions repeatedly or asking questions in which the answer cannot be known (e.g., “Am I going to be okay?”), searching for answers online (e.g., searching physical symptoms), or engaging in certainty-seeking behaviors (e.g., repeated checking). Less obvious reassurance seeking behaviors include making statements intended to elicit a certain response from others (e.g., “I know my therapist wouldn’t assign me this homework if it was truly dangerous”) and self-reassurance (having a “good” thought to prevent a negative outcome, or saying “I am going to be okay”).

Reassurance seeking is rooted in a perceived need for certainty and discomfort with uncertainty, also known as *intolerance of uncertainty*. People with OCD and PTSD often struggle with moving forward in a given moment until certainty is (believed to be) obtained, or feel very negatively about uncertainties related to their fears, often feeling as though these uncertainties are bad, unfair, or dangerous. Exposure therapy has been shown to improve someone’s tolerance to life’s uncertainties, whereas continued avoidance of uncertainty has been linked to reduced treatment effectiveness. Because there are slight but important differences in OCD treatment and PTSD treatment, it is important for both patients and providers to understand how to recognize and respond to reassurance and uncertainty depending on whether the reassurance is believed to be functionally stemming from OCD or PTSD.

### Understanding the Function of Reassurance in OCD and PTSD

Since intolerance of uncertainty characterizes both OCD and PTSD, it is not surprising that people who have co-occurring OCD and PTSD are even more intolerant of uncertainty, and that this avoidance of uncertainty has a detrimental effect on their treatment. Because OCD and PTSD fears/uncertainties can look the same across the two conditions, and sometimes even overlap, it can be difficult to figure out whether an uncertainty that has arisen is functionally stemming from OCD or PTSD. However, it is important for providers and patients to make this distinction because your response to reassurance and uncertainty depends on knowing what the function of it is. Here are some helpful things to consider:

#### In OCD:

- Coping with uncertainty in the moment can feel *urgent*. You may have a feeling that you need to do something *right now* (often a compulsion) or else you cannot move forward.
- Certainty-seeking behaviors function to eliminate or prevent the feeling of uncertainty.
- In OCD the desire is to obtain 100% certainty; 99.9% is typically “not good enough.”
- You never really get the certainty you’re looking for. Whether you’re asking a question repeatedly, insisting on a specific answer that is not being given, asking someone who is unqualified to answer, seeking a definitive answer that is impossible to provide, or stuck engaging in repetitive compulsions, it may feel like the closer you get to certainty, the

further away you are. This is because OCD fears are often characterized by debilitating doubt.

- Reassurance seeking begets more reassurance seeking. Even if you do feel as though you've obtained the certainty you were looking for in the moment, this feeling of being "sure" only lasts for a little while, and soon enough you are back to seeking reassurance about that same fear, or a new fear, again. It can almost feel as though you are building a tolerance for reassurance, and that each time you seek it, you need more of it in order to satisfy your unsatiable need for certainty.

#### **In PTSD:**

- Uncertainty typically centers on your trauma and whether it will happen again. Sometimes, there may be uncertainty about your recollection of the trauma, since PTSD can impact the encoding and storage of these memories leading to gaps in trauma memory.
- Certainty-seeking behaviors like checking and planning ahead function to increase a feeling of safety, restore a sense of controllability, or prevent a future trauma.
- Unlike in OCD, there can sometimes feel like a sense of "completeness" to reassurance seeking because the PTSD fear is not rooted in doubt but rather a need for safety. Once it feels like safety has been obtained, reassurance seeking is no longer needed.

## Navigating Reassurance and Uncertainty in Co-Occurring OCD and PTSD

Once you've identified the *function* of reassurance seeking, you can have a better idea of how to respond to it. If it is still unclear to you whether the function of reassurance seeking is certainty (OCD) or safety (PTSD), always err on the side of OCD, and instead challenge yourself to sit with the uncertainty and trust in your ability to tolerate whatever happens. The below statements are relevant for both yourself, for your treatment providers, and for your loved ones who are supporting your recovery.

### If the function is a *need for certainty* (OCD):

- You are doing a really great job sitting with the uncertainty.
- I'm not sure if that will happen or not, but I believe in your ability to tolerate whatever happens.
- Your intrusive thoughts do not define who you are.
- I'm proud of you.

### If the function is a *need for trauma-related safety* (PTSD):

- You are safe here.
- Remembering the trauma is not the same as experiencing it.
- The memory of the trauma, while painful, cannot hurt you.
- You survived the trauma, so you can definitely endure the memory of it.
- I understand this exposure idea feels unsafe to you. Do other people you know do [ACTIVITY]?
- I understand this exposure idea feels unsafe to you. Do other people you know think [ACTIVITY] is unsafe?
- I'm proud of you

With practice, over time you can build insight into your own certainty-seeking behaviors and be able to challenge them in the moment. I believe you can do it!

## References

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