

Understanding Your OCD and PTSD Symptoms Worksheet

OCD and PTSD are similar in that they both involve intrusive, unwanted thoughts or images that lead to engagement in safety behaviors, rituals, and/or avoidance behaviors that are done in response to these upsetting thoughts. *Safety behaviors* are any behaviors (including mental actions) that are used to try to avoid, suppress, reduce, or prevent anxiety or distress.

Although safety behaviors can look really similar in OCD and PTSD, it is possible to figure out where the behavior is *stemming from* by identifying the feeling that you experience when completing the behavior (this gives you a clue as to what the *function* of the behavior was) as well as the intrusive thoughts or images that might come to you if you resisted engaging in the behavior (this gives you a clue as to what fear the behavior is connected to).

Although there is a lot of overlap in OCD and PTSD symptoms, when OCD and PTSD are co-occurring, it is important to find the “seam” that separates the symptoms of each disorder. Doing so will help you build insight into your own symptoms, understand where they stem from, and, importantly, know how to respond to them when they arise. This worksheet offers a step-by-step guide to learning how to understand the difference between your OCD symptoms and PTSD symptoms.

	OCD	PTSD
Thought Content	Future focused (“what if’s?”) Span multiple domains	Focused on a memories of specific past event, replaying/flashbacks
Repetitive Behavior	Rigid set of rules Focused on the ‘how’ Get more complex over time Not tied to specific experience	Preventing trauma from reoccurring Feel safe or in control
Avoidance	Uncertainty Bad things happening in the future Feeling not right	Past memories of trauma Triggers Painful emotions associated with the traumatic event
Task Completion	Doing it “perfect” Resolving/fixing/evening out	Doing it “right” to maintain safety/control Escaping danger
Relationship to Thoughts	Must be controlled, neutralized, figured out, prevented from coming true	To be avoided
Underlying Feature	Preventing possible feared consequences Intolerance of uncertainty	Avoiding emotional pain and re-experiencing trauma

Adapted from Van Kirk, N. (2015, August). When fears become real: Post-traumatic OCD. In Van Kirk, N. (Chair), Solodyna, A., Grayson, J. & Timpano, K. Understanding the Impact of Comorbid PTSD on the Conceptualization and Treatment of OCD. Symposium presented at the 22nd annual International Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Foundation conference, Boston, MA

The following is adapted from the OCD Trauma Timeline Interview (OTTI) by Wadsworth and colleagues (2021):

In this hypothetical example, “Simon” has experienced an increase in symptoms since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Simon reports safety behaviors including excessive cleaning, repeatedly checking CDC guidelines about COVID-19, and experiences heightened anxiety and avoidance of leaving his home because he feels the outside world is contaminated. These safety behaviors extend to his family, as his worry leads to excessive monitoring of his children, keeping them from leaving he home, preoccupation with their physical health, and promoting excessive hygiene behaviors (e.g., handwashing, wiping down groceries, etc.). Simon has also shared that his father died five years ago in an automobile accident, and that this experience has caused PTSD symptoms of intrusive memories, avoidance of reminders of his father, guilt, and difficulty sleeping and concentrating. He believes that he could have done more to prevent his father’s accident, and feels an immense amount of shame and guilt for not preventing his father’s death. Simon completed the following worksheet to help understand the difference between his OCD symptoms and his PTSD symptoms.

Obsessions or thoughts that overlap between OCD and PTSD	Safety behaviors, rituals, or avoidance behavior completed in response to the thought	Did completing the safety behavior give you: a. Greater sense of safety b. Greater sense of certainty around feared outcomes	If you resisted doing the safety behavior, you would experience intrusive thoughts or images of: a. Past stressful events b. Potential future scenarios (e.g., “what if” scenarios)
If I don’t wipe down the car door handle, my kids will get COVID-19 and die	-Excessively wipe surfaces -Wash hands repeatedly -Monitor kids’ handwashing	b. I feel like my kids will be safer now that I’ve reduced the risk of them getting COVID-19	b. What if my kids get sick and die?
I am responsible for keeping my loved ones safe	-Avoid memories, pictures, stories about deceased father	a. I don’t have to re-live these painful memories, I can avoid them instead	a. Images of my father dying

Simon may have developed a sense of over-responsibility following his father’s death that has led to a fixation on keeping his children safe from COVID-19, out of fear of being responsible for more loved ones dying. Although these fears are related, Simon was able to find the “seam” and identify which of these symptoms were OCD and which were PTSD.

Using Simon's examples as a reference, think about the intrusive thoughts or images that you have that relate to your traumatic experiences, the safety behaviors in which you engage in response to these intrusive thoughts or images, and the function of these behaviors. Use the space below.

Obsessions or thoughts that overlap between OCD and PTSD	Safety behaviors, rituals, or avoidance behavior completed in response to the thought	Did completing the safety behavior give you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Greater sense of safety b. Greater sense of certainty around feared outcomes 	If you resisted doing the safety behavior, you would experience intrusive thoughts or images of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Past stressful events b. Potential future scenarios (e.g., "what if" scenarios)

References

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