

## How is OCD Treated?

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If your child has OCD, you have options. A noted expert discusses the most effective form of treatment.

The evidence-based treatment for obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and anxiety disorders is Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). It's not simply the traditional talk therapy or play therapy. CBT resembles going to school or learning a new skill. The expert's goal is to teach you about OCD and anxiety, and the skills needed to defeat it. The patient's role is to learn the tools and practice using them in between sessions to strengthen the skill set.

In CBT, you learn to identify negative thinking patterns that aren't serving you. This allows you to change your perspective about yourself and the world in order to engage with the environment in healthier ways. For OCD, Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) therapy is a specific type of CBT that helps you confront fears one step at a time, so you can learn that the fears actually are not that threatening. ERP also helps you to disobey those ritualistic urges, so the OCD "rules" become weaker and weaker. Over time and with enough practice, the sufferer can break free from OCD.

The length of treatment will depend on the severity and complexity of the symptoms, as well as the child's motivation. Quick learners can adapt to the skills within a few months, while other kids will take longer. CBT requires you to practice the skills on your own once you've acquired them in session. So the rate of improvement depends on how much effort each child puts into the exercises assigned in between sessions. Also, as in any physical exercise, you need to keep practicing to keep the muscles strong. CBT is essentially exercise for your brain. The more you flex those brain muscles, the stronger you become.

If a child's symptoms are severe or the child refuses CBT, then the use of medication may be warranted. However, we have evidence from more than two decades of neuroimaging research that CBT actually changes the neurochemistry of the brain. Because the young brain is still developing, and because there are so many negative side-effects associated with medications, for kids, CBT would be the first route to take. When medication is used, the dosage can usually be reduced gradually as the child learns to apply CBT tools. The ultimate goal is for sufferers to rely on their own skills, rather than depending on medications for the rest of their lives.

In working with children, it is imperative to also teach family members about OCD and how to be supportive without enabling the condition. OCD rarely affects just the child without causing havoc for the whole family. Pediatric OCD specialists generally coach parents on how to help children defeat OCD or manage an anxiety meltdown. This helps parents feel more confident about their own abilities to interact with their children.

### **How do you find an OCD expert?**

You can find therapists trained to treat OCD and anxiety at the International OCD Foundation [www.ocffoundation.org](http://www.ocffoundation.org) and at Anxiety and Depression Association of America [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

Here are some basic questions to ask potential therapists:

1. What is your specific training and experience in treating OCD/anxiety?
2. How many people with OCD/anxiety have you SUCCESSFULLY treated?
3. What are your specific method(s) for treating OCD/anxiety? The response needs to be more specific than just Cognitive Behavior Therapy and they should explain other methods.
4. What is the average length of successful treatment?
5. Are you a known specialist in treating OCD/anxiety?

Keep in mind that OCD symptoms are often subtle and start and grow over time, like a dimmer that eventually gets really bright. See an expert early on and begin to learn tools before OCD becomes unmanageable in your child.

*Jenny C. Yip, Psy.D., is a licensed psychologist, and executive director of the Renewed Freedom Center in Los Angeles, which she founded in 2008. Dr. Yip is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at USC Keck School of Medicine and nationally recognized OCD expert who successfully treats severe OCD and related anxiety disorders. For more information go to [www.renewedfreedomcenter.com](http://www.renewedfreedomcenter.com)*

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