

Autism & OCD

This factsheet is for:

- Neurodivergent adults
- Parents & Carers and
- Professionals



Summary:

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), is a mental illness that can cause someone's life to be dominated by unwanted repetitive behaviours and intrusive thoughts. OCD can be treated with therapy and medication. Autistic people with OCD may not be diagnosed as symptoms can appear similar to autistic behaviours. Autism cannot be treated with therapy and medication.

More detail:

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a mental illness where obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours can dominate your life and prevent you from carrying out normal activities such as work, school or even practising basic self-care. Sufferers may find themselves unable to stop from repeating tasks many times, such as checking that a door is locked or a cooker turned off, and that their thoughts are dominated by unwanted negative ideas and concerns. OCD is not just an obsession with neatness, and we are not all "a bit OCD". It is a serious mental health condition.

There can be an apparent overlap between autistic behaviours and OCD symptoms. Many autistic people find comfort in routines and repetitive behaviours, particularly stimming – repeated movements or actions that stimulate one or more senses and have a calming effect. OCD sufferers feel they have no choice but to repeat actions or there will be serious negative consequences, either directly such as an explosion through not turning off the gas, or a false belief that bad things will happen if they do not repeat a certain action. Combined with intrusive negative thoughts, OCD can have a devastating impact on people's lives, including autistic people.

Unfortunately, the similarity in the appearance of autistic and OCD traits can lead to OCD suffered by autistic people being missed or misattributed to an aspect of autism. This is why it is essential to listen to autistic people in whatever way they are able to or choose to communicate. If repeated actions or thoughts are causing them distress and problems, they need help in addressing this just as anyone else would. Autistic people are generally very conscious of why they repeat certain actions and the benefits that this brings them, so they will equally know when they are subject to a compulsion that feels outside their control and has a negative impact on their life.

It is important to seek professional medical help if OCD is having an impact on your or a loved ones life. Treatment can include medication or therapy, such as cognitive behavioural therapy which is used to control intrusive negative thoughts. When seeking treatment, it is important to let the medical professionals know that the person is autistic.

