

# OCD at UNI

ocdaction  
it's time to act



When you're struggling with OCD, university may seem very daunting. You may be at the planning stages, or have begun your course already. Perhaps you've had OCD for years? Or maybe OCD has only become a problem now that you're organising your life and studies away from the support of family and school? Whatever the situation, we hope you find useful information here - and there's more support available at:

[ocdaction.org.uk](http://ocdaction.org.uk) & [ocdyouth.org](http://ocdyouth.org)

## What is OCD?

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is an anxiety disorder affecting around 1-2% of the population. It is debilitating and paralysing, and a clinical diagnosis of OCD meets the definition of a disability under UK legislation. People with OCD experience obsessions in the form of intensely negative, repetitive and intrusive thoughts, combined with chronic feeling of doubt or danger. They carry out compulsions in order to reduce the anxiety they feel from an obsession.

### Some common obsessions are:

- Fears about dirt or contamination
- Worry that you may come to, or cause, harm
- Unwanted sexual thoughts
- Thoughts about doing something forbidden or embarrassing

- Discomfort if things aren't symmetrical/even
- Needing to tell, ask or confess
- Fears of losing important things

### Some common compulsions are:

- Checking (this can include checking objects, actions, memory, symptoms, one's body or one's arousal levels, and many other things)
- Touching or tapping things
- Washing and cleaning
- Counting, repeating and re-doing things
- Arranging things so that they are 'just right'
- Seeking reassurance
- Rumination (turning things over and over in your mind)
- Avoiding particular situations
- Hoarding or collecting things that are useless

# When O & C become a D

Almost everybody experiences from time to time the types of thought that people with OCD have. However, most people are able to dismiss these thoughts. Many people now use terms like 'a bit OCD-ish' without understanding the distressing and debilitating nature of the disorder in its severest form.

People with OCD cannot ignore unpleasant thoughts and instead pay undue attention to them. This means that the thoughts become more frequent and distressing and, over time, they can affect all areas of a person's life. High levels of anxiety can lead to inappropriate expression of anger and frustration.

Being exposed to objects and situations that trigger the obsessional fears can create high levels of distress and increase the need to carry out the compulsive behaviours. As OCD is an anxiety disorder, the more stress a person is under, the worse their OCD can become. This is worth bearing in mind when preparing to make a major life change such as going to university.

## Getting treatment

**The good news is that OCD can be successfully treated, and it is important to prioritise getting effective treatment.**

The recommended evidence-based treatments for OCD are cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), involving graded exposure and response prevention (ERP), and/or medication with selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). You can read more about this at OCD Action's website or at NHS Choices ([www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)).

If you are moving away from your family home you will need to register with a new GP. This is also the case for international students, though students from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) now have to pay a Health Surcharge when obtaining their UK visa in order to access NHS services. You can find out a lot about local practices through the NHS Choices website. Factors you might want to take into consideration when choosing a GP include:

- the number of GPs at the practice – in a larger practice you have more chances to find a GP who is helpful about OCD

- the individual interests and specialisms of the GPs – there may be someone with a psychiatry or psychology background
- whether the practice has its own counselling/CBT practitioners
- how convenient it is to make appointments and get repeat prescriptions

You can register with a new GP as soon as you have written proof of your new address, for example your halls accommodation contract.

If you are being prescribed medication already, organising your change of GP early on will mean you can continue your prescription with as little disruption as possible.

## Setting out: my decisions

**"I've had a diagnosis of OCD since I was 14, severe enough to be treated at the national specialist service at the Maudsley hospital. At times distressing thoughts made it hard for me to go on public transport and be with others, and my rituals absorbed hours of my day. CBT and SSRIs turned my life around, though I still have good days and bad days, and have to work hard to keep on top of my OCD.**

**"When I applied to university I didn't declare a disability on the UCAS form, as I saw in their guidance notes that it wasn't compulsory. Although I know universities aren't allowed to discriminate, I felt that if I were rejected I might worry that my OCD had tipped the balance against me, and so I decided to take it out of the equation. However, after I got a firm offer I sent in a letter from my clinical psychologist to support my student accommodation application, and I was offered a place in a hall of residence right on the campus, which I think will really help.**

**"I've now decided to register properly with the university's disability service. This hasn't been a straightforward decision, as I'm not sure I want to identify as 'disabled'. I'm going into a competitive team-working field, and I feel uncomfortable with the idea of having to have allowances made for me. However, I'm all too aware of the time I still lose to OCD and to avoiding triggering situations, and how my preoccupations can get in the way of me studying and keeping organised, so I'm going to register and see what support might be available."**



If you are already in treatment with a mental health clinic, you should talk to your therapist about your options for ongoing treatment when you move away. You may have to have a referral to a clinic in the area you move to, and so it's good to get on the waiting list as soon as possible either through your new GP, or in certain areas through self-referral to IAPT services (Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies). OCD Action has a downloadable information card on its website to help you get appropriate help when you're approaching a GP for the first time about OCD. It also has a list of IAPT services that accept self-referral, and advice for getting a referral to a National & Specialist OCD service.

An alternative route to therapy could be through the university itself, which is likely to have a Health and Wellbeing centre (or some similar service, the set-up will vary from place to place). Many universities can offer counselling or even CBT to students.

You should be aware, though, that non-CBT counselling sessions have the potential to exacerbate OCD, if the emphasis is on exploring childhood experiences or keeping thought diaries, or if they encourage you to seek and obtain reassurance. However, counselling services can help with other aspects of student life, and may help you access more targeted CBT options.

- **“Adult services aren't like CAMHS, and you might have a long wait for treatment even if you've been in the system back home. You may have to go back to the start of a waiting list. Be ready to fight your own corner, especially if your parents have previously always done it for you.”**

## Advance planning

It's a good idea to try and identify your key needs and potential problem areas. This will help when looking at what different universities might have to offer, and subsequently if you choose to approach your university's disability services or apply for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) (see later section).

Maybe sit down with your parents or someone who knows you well to have an honest conversation about how OCD affects your life. Draw up a brief outline of what a regular day or week looks like, taking into account bad days as well as the best. What sort of support do you normally get in your home and school/college environment? What happens if nobody is there to support you? What makes it more difficult for you to manage your condition? What coping strategies make it easier? Remember, it may not be obvious to other people how OCD affects your life. Often, only those closest to you can see the struggle.

## Looking back: telling people about my OCD

"I was only diagnosed with OCD during university, but this is something I've had from an early age. I knew I had a mental health problem, but I didn't know that I could receive much help for it, and so I didn't seek help until prompted or consider that it could affect my grades at all. I also didn't know that I could maybe get financial help.

"During undergraduate studies I let my dissertation supervisor know that I have OCD, and explained how it was affecting me in terms of this work, but I didn't tell anyone else. Again, I didn't officially disclose my OCD for my Master's, but I told my dissertation supervisor from an early stage in case of later difficulties. When I started applying for PhD positions I began disclosing mental health problems from the word 'go'. During my Master's I found that I could have had help all the time I'd been at university, for example extra time and breaks in exams.

"I would recommend anyone with OCD to disclose their problems to their university on application. Also, if you can see it affecting your work, disclosing your problems to a supervisor or tutor may seem daunting, but it's most often very useful (and in my experience supervisors are very sympathetic).

"I also spoke to a few GPs about my OCD whilst I was at university, but found that they didn't understand much about the condition and were sometimes reluctant to find out what could be done for me – OCD Action have very helpful leaflets for GPs that would have made it easier for me!

"I didn't disclose my OCD to any of my peers whilst I was still studying, but in retrospect this would have been helpful and my friends have been very supportive since finding out. Actually, I even found out after graduating that several of my friends had been silently suffering from mental health problems, including someone else with OCD, so it's always worth telling those close to you. I would definitely tell people earlier if I could live my life again, and I'm glad I've told my new university from an early stage."

## Telling your university

It may seem a strange thing to say when you're just starting at university, but it can actually help to remember that you can always leave - there is a way out if it's not for you. There are no certainties in life - and that's OK!

On the positive side, there's a lot of support available during your time at university, and to give yourself the best chance possible it is well worth exploring what is available. It will ultimately be your decision when, or indeed whether, to share your OCD diagnosis. However, tackling OCD can be challenging. Getting people on your side can make a massive difference and help you to feel that you are not facing it alone. Remember, you have great potential, and it is important that you have the right support to achieve your goals.

OCD and other mental illnesses that have "a substantial and long-term (lasting over 12 months) effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities" constitute a disability under UK legislation. Your university will have a disability service, and many students with OCD find it really helpful to register with it.

You may be worried about potential discrimination from tutors and fellow students. However, under UK legislation a publicly-funded higher education provider cannot create a situation in which a disabled student is put at a disadvantage, and this covers all aspects of attending the course, including the admissions process, the provision of teaching and access to facilities and services. 'Reasonable Adjustments' have to be made (see box on the opposite page).

A common worry is that you won't even get an offer of a place if your OCD is declared at the outset. Though universities by law are not allowed to discriminate in this way, ultimately it is up to you whether or not to disclose a disability on your UCAS form. UCAS makes this very clear: *"You can always tell your chosen course providers about your situation once you're accepted – after your welcome email arrives – but check what support they have on offer first."*

You can contact the university disability service at any stage of your application or studies. You can find it on the university website, or search at the Disabled Students' Allowance Quality Assurance website: [www.dsa-qag.org/students](http://www.dsa-qag.org/students).





## Reasonable adjustments

The 2010 Equality Act in England, Scotland and Wales requires publicly-funded universities to make “reasonable adjustments” to enable people with disabilities to study without being at a disadvantage. The 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and 2005 Special Educational Needs & Disability Order in Northern Ireland work very similarly. In this context “reasonable” means that it must be effective, be financially viable (often with the help of Disabled Students’ Allowance - see next page), fulfil health and safety requirements and not disadvantage other students.

An extra consideration for students in some vocational fields, including medicine and nursing, is that the reasonable adjustments must also fit in with what is required by the relevant professional body, such as the General Medical Council or Nursing and Midwifery Council. This means that adjustments made cannot affect the safety of that individual in future practice.

For students with OCD, reasonable adjustments might include:

- Extending coursework deadlines
- Extra time/rests during exams
- An “exam prompter”, who would assist students with concentration difficulties or time management issues by periodically reminding them to re-focus, concentrate on answering the exam questions and complete the paper within the prescribed time
- Time off when the OCD is especially bad
- Support from welfare and counselling staff

Some adjustments and aids from which you can benefit may need to be funded. The Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) can pay for:

- Non-medical helpers, for example mentors, who would meet regularly with students and, for instance, help them keep track of their timetables and deadlines, or keep productive
- Specialist equipment required for studying, such as a laptop, software or a Dictaphone
- Extra travel costs incurred to get to your university because of your disability
- Other costs such as photocopying, paper, and printer cartridges

You can also find whether your university has a Mental Health Adviser affiliated with the University Mental Health Advisers Network at [www.umhan.com](http://www.umhan.com).

You can choose whether or not to give the disability service permission to share your situation with your departmental staff.

Once you’ve started your course, alternative first ports of call could be your personal tutor, who would be able to share information with other academic staff on a need-to-know basis, or your Students’ Union advice service, which would be able to give you advice that would be independent of your academic department.

It may be best to discuss your situation with your university disability services or tutor just in case, even if you are currently doing OK and are confident your work will not be affected by your OCD. If you leave it until the day before an exam or deadline to seek help, it may be less likely that you’d be offered special consideration.

Many students have given feedback to OCD Action that looking back they would share their situation at the outset, rather than waiting until there was a crisis. The energy and effort that it takes to fight OCD can leave your academic reserves depleted. It’s all too easy to slip into old patterns, and allow much-needed distraction to turn into the full-scale avoidance and procrastination that is often part of the OCD experience.

But whatever stage you’re at, if you need help, ask. The hardest thing is making the move to go and find that help, but it’ll be worth it.

## Looking after yourself

Starting university and leaving your family and friends behind can be highly nerve-wracking. More often than not you will settle in quickly, but if you are worried about getting to grips with a new place and new people, some people find it helpful to seek out potential flatmates and people who will be on your course in advance by searching on Facebook, or via websites such as [thestudentroom.co.uk](http://thestudentroom.co.uk).

University requires a lot of hard work (not to mention partying!), so it's important to look after yourself. CBT therapist Katie d'Ath talked recently to OCD Action about proven ways to help reduce anxiety and stress:

- Sleep when you need it
- Eat a balanced diet
- Exercise regularly

Finally, try to stick to a good working routine. Give yourself short, regular breaks and take yourself away from your work for a breather if you start to feel frustrated. Make sure you look after number one!

## Applying for Disabled Students' Allowance

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is a grant designed to help with extra costs incurred in providing support for disabilities, including long term mental health conditions such as OCD. It is assessed solely on need and not income, and does not need to be repaid. It can fund specialist equipment, non-medical helpers, travel (for instance if you can't use public transport) and other general expenses (see "Reasonable adjustments" on previous page).

DSA can be applied for either at the same time as you apply for student fees and loans, or afterwards. The form can be downloaded from the regional Student Finance websites, or from [www.yourdsa.com](http://www.yourdsa.com). You should also be able to get a copy from the student disability service at your university, and you will most likely be able to get help there to fill it in. Some PhD students instead need to approach the Research Council or other organisation funding their degree to see what comparable support may be on offer.



In order to receive DSA, you first need to provide evidence to show that you qualify. You have to give a brief history of your condition in the application form, and a letter or diagnostic assessment from your GP or mental health specialist is required as supporting evidence. This should clearly state how your condition affects your life and your studies. The Disabled Students' Allowance guidance notes that: "Sometimes a student's disability does not substantially affect their normal day-to-day activities but does have a substantial effect on their ability to study. In the context of DSA 'day-to-day activities' includes education."

It may take a few weeks for your application to be processed. Hopefully you will be sent a letter confirming your eligibility for DSA and offering to fund you for an assessment at a Needs Assessment Centre, which is likely to be in a nearby large town (find your nearest using the search tool at [www.dsa-qag.org.uk](http://www.dsa-qag.org.uk)). This is a meeting with an assessor with a specialist mental health background who will talk through your difficulties with you and identify areas where DSA could help you, and it can last up to two hours.

If you are studying with the Open University, or if you opt to use the OU Access Centre for your assessment (which is open to all higher education students), you can book a visit from the OU Access Bus, which enables assessors to travel to those students who need to have their assessment at home.

After your assessment, the assessor writes up a report recommending particular support or equipment to be funded and sends it to be approved by Student Finance, which usually takes another few weeks. You will be notified whether your funding is approved, and you will then be able to access what DSA has to offer. There will probably be another wait for any equipment that is ordered to arrive.

The process is unfortunately very lengthy, but throughout much of it support is at hand. You should apply for DSA as early as possible in order to have the best chance of having everything that is needed in place for the start of a course. However, you can make an application at any stage – in fact it's been the case to date that the majority of students have applied after they've started university, since it was only then that they found out it was available.

Once the DSA is fully in place, it has vast potential to provide the necessary extra assistance.

For undergraduates, the DSA carries over to subsequent years of a course without needing to reapply, but if you are a part-time or post-graduate student, or DSA is the only student funding you are applying for, you will need to re-apply each year.

## Study abroad

If you are intending to study abroad for a year, early planning will give you the best chance of putting in place the support you need. It is worth discussing options well in advance with your university disability service and study abroad coordinator.

Your host institution may have appropriate health and disability services, but researching and accessing them may be difficult. Alternatively there may be therapy options outside the institution, or Skype support available from your UK university. For degrees where a year abroad is an integral part of the course, you will still be eligible to apply for DSA.

The Erasmus programme has its own "special needs" funding arrangements for disabled students. There may be other sources of funding available, for instance OCD Action knows of one student who successfully applied to her UK university-specific Access to Learning hardship fund to pay for private CBT abroad.

## DSA experiences

- "When I met with a disability advisor at my university, she offered me various adjustments there and then, including coursework extensions and extra-long library loans. She also told me about the mental health mentorship programme, which could be available to me if I received DSA.

"As Student Finance already had most of my details from my original application, I downloaded and filled in a 'DSA Slim' form, and I sent it off with copies of my medical evidence. Within a week it was confirmed that I was eligible, and I got the go-ahead to book my DSA Needs Assessment. The Assessment Centre sent me a form to complete in advance with more information about the impact of my disability.

"I was very anxious in advance of the assessment, and I found it challenging talking about my OCD with a stranger. Though I felt quite drained by the experience, the assessor was incredibly helpful and patient and I felt he was really on my side. He recommended that I should be funded for mental health mentorship, so hopefully that'll be in place soon."

- "A note-taker is one of the most helpful supports I've had. Mine only take my notes if I'm physically present but they're great for when you're there in person but not in mind (e.g. me my entire second year).

"Get the DSA application in early 'cos by the time I'd been through the whole application process I didn't actually get my note-takers until March of my first year. My uni usually hires staff at the start of the academic year and has to do more interviews and training for staff needed from mid-year applications so there's a delay. My specialist equipment didn't come till June of my first year either!"

- "There's plenty of support available. The key is to embrace it. The best thing about DSA has been the invaluable support I get from my mental health mentor on a weekly basis, and how he can be integrated into my general care and crisis plans."

# Build a support network

It's a good idea to make a list of where you can go for assistance and support. If you have organisational difficulties, stick the list on a wall, or keep it handy on your smartphone.

- Don't forget your friends and family - plan regular check-in phone calls and visits home
- Your university Health and Wellbeing centre (or similar) and Disability Service, for advice, support, and sometimes even therapy
- Your local GP, or mental health service
- Your personal tutor
- Your Students' Union support service
- Ring OCD Action's 9-5 volunteer helpline for advice or someone to talk to: **0845 390 6232**

- Visit [www.ocdaction.org.uk](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk) for factsheets, forums to chat to others, and Advocacy to help you access support with, for instance, academic work or housing
- Independent local support groups are listed at [www.ocdaction.org.uk/support-groups](http://www.ocdaction.org.uk/support-groups)
- OCD Action youth project [www.ocdyouth.org](http://www.ocdyouth.org) has lots of articles, links and blogs about student life, plus social events to attend, support forums and a new e-helpline
- If you need emotional support out of hours, call the student-to-student helpline Nightline - find the local service at [www.nightline.ac.uk](http://www.nightline.ac.uk)
- For help with equality issues, welfare benefits or access to higher education, contact the Disabled Students' Helpline at Disability Rights UK: [www.disabilityrightsuk.org](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org)



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