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getting the healthy support you deserve

Living with intrusive thoughts, anxious feelings, and compulsive behaviors that other people don't seem to understand can feel like a lonely journey. But connecting with others gives you a sense of security and belonging, reducing feelings of isolation and providing encouragement and new perspectives to help you confront life with OCD. Building a social support network also helps distract you from obsessions and compulsions to lessen their hold. What's more, research shows that by increasing feelings of well-being, social support boosts your immune system and increases resilience to stress, thus reducing the risk of stress-related physical illnesses, such as heart disease and strokes.

This chapter delves into the role of support systems. You'll learn strategies for building and nurturing these essential connections. Various avenues for gaining support, including peer and professional networks as well as advocacy organizations, are described. You'll also get strategies for tackling obstacles associated with social support that often occur for people with OCD.

Harnessing the Power of a Social Support Network

When you're facing life with OCD, healthy social connections can enhance your journey by leading to greater satisfaction with life in numerous ways. Here are some of the key benefits:

- Reduced isolation
- Emotional support, empathy, and understanding from others
- Access to advice, new perspectives, and coping skills for managing tricky situations
- Resilience to anxiety, depression, and trauma
- Better cardiovascular health and a stronger immune system

Are you content with your social support network? If you find it lacking, this section offers guidance on how to enhance it.

Identifying Supportive People in Your Life

The first step is identifying those you can count on to reliably offer empathy and support. Look for friends, family members, coworkers, and acquaintances who show patience and a willingness to understand your experiences. Keep in mind that in finding supportive people quantity is less important than *quality*. You want people who listen without judgment, respect your boundaries, and offer encouragement. Consider doing the following to seek them out:

- **Reflect on past interactions:** Who has a good track record of being kindhearted and understanding in difficult times? Who are the good listeners that respond without judgment? Pay attention to how people react when you (or others) face challenges. Those who are patient and offer constructive support are likely good candidates.
- **Seek shared experiences:** People who have faced similar challenges (such as other mental health disorders) are often particularly empathic and supportive.

- **Consider trustworthiness:** Trust is crucial. Follow your intuition—do you feel comfortable and safe sharing your thoughts and experiences with the other person?

- **Look for emotional intelligence:** People who are good at understanding and managing their own feelings, as well as dealing with others' emotions, are often the most empathic and supportive.

- **Prioritize respect for boundaries:** Identify people who respect your boundaries and personal space, a crucial aspect of any supportive relationship.

The goal is to cultivate a network of people who make you feel heard, respected, and understood. So approach this process thoughtfully and choose people who make positive contributions to your well-being and ability to manage OCD. Once you've identified them, reach out with openness and honesty using the strategies covered in Chapter 6.

Cultivating Your Network

Building your social support network, however, is just the beginning. You also need to actively maintain it to ensure it continues to work effectively for you. It's a little like tending a garden: Just as a garden requires regular watering, weeding, and nurturing to thrive, your support network needs consistent effort, care, and dedication if you are to fully reap its benefits. Here's what you need to do.

COMMUNICATE

Consistent and open communication is the cornerstone of any strong relationship because it fortifies the bonds between people. Make it a point to stay in touch and share experiences through regular meetups, phone calls, or digital communication.

RECIPROCATE

If you rely on others for support, you've got to show up for them too. Listening, offering encouragement, and supporting those in your

network by celebrating their successes and being there for them during tough times shows your investment in the relationship and cultivates a balanced and mutually rewarding connection where you both feel valued.

SHOW APPRECIATION

Let your supporters know you're grateful for what they do for you. This also deepens your connections and makes others want to step up in your times of need. Three excellent ways to show your appreciation are:

- **Verbal acknowledgments:** Telling someone directly how much you appreciate their support and understanding makes them feel valued. Let them know how they've positively impacted your life. Share your progress or moments of triumph so they can see the value of their support.

- **Acts of kindness:** Writing a thank-you note is a personal and heartfelt way to express gratitude. You could also give a gift to show your appreciation. Examples of appropriate gifts include a book, food basket, gift card, homemade item, or something you know has special significance for the person you want to thank.

- **Spending quality time together:** You can also show gratitude by enjoying activities together (such as cooking a meal, attending a festival, or playing a game) or just having a meaningful conversation. When you engage in shared interests, you not only strengthen your bond, but also receive a temporary distraction from the stress of OCD.

BE PATIENT AND FLEXIBLE

Life's constant changes affect people's availability and capacity to offer support. By being patient, you allow for understanding when others cannot provide immediate help. When you're flexible, you're able to modify how you engage with your network as circumstances evolve. This might mean changing communication methods (for example,

phone calls instead of visits), adjusting the frequency of interactions, or redefining the roles different people play in your support system. For instance, if a friend who used to be your confidant becomes less available due to new responsibilities, you might need to seek additional support from other members of your network.

Leveraging Specialized Support from Peers and Groups

Although your social support network is great for offering general encouragement and companionship in various situations, you'll also gain from engaging in networks that provide specialized advice specifically designed for managing OCD. Peer support, provided by others living with OCD, can give you a unique understanding and shared perspective that your friends and family may lack. Advocacy groups, which are organizations dedicated to helping people affected by OCD, are also excellent sources of focused support. Fortunately, the OCD community is rich with support groups, peer support workers, and advocacy organizations the world over.

OCD Support Groups

In-person and online support groups offer environments for sharing experiences, feeling understood, and learning from others with OCD. There are online resources, including websites like the IOCDF (*www.iocdf.org*), that offer directories of both local and online support groups. Mental health clinics often provide information about regional groups and may even host their own. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Reddit, also feature dedicated groups where people share experiences and advice. It's important when joining a group to make sure it aligns with your needs, so I recommend attending a few sessions to gauge the group's dynamics.

In-person support groups typically meet at a set location like a community center, treatment clinic, or even someone's home. Meetings are often scheduled on a weekly or monthly basis and are facilitated

by an experienced group member. These groups provide a tangible sense of community and connection, allowing you to experience face-to-face interactions and support through activities such as discussions on specific topics, sharing personal experiences, and hearing from guest speakers. The physical presence of others who understand the challenges of OCD can be incredibly validating and comforting.

On the other hand, online support groups afford greater flexibility and accessibility, which might be important if you live in a rural area, have trouble getting around due to OCD symptoms, or simply prefer the anonymity of an online setting. These groups may operate through text posts, chat rooms, video meetings, or a combination of them. And since members might be online and active at various times throughout the day and night, they can offer a more consistent support system with quicker responses and interactions.

Peer Support Workers

Individual peer support workers, who have personal experience with OCD and are trained to support others with this disorder, can also play a role in helping you flourish. These people share their own journey, offering relatable insights and hope. By providing emotional support, they can help you feel less isolated and give suggestions for how to contend with the daily hassles caused by OCD. Peer support workers are also skilled at guiding you to useful resources, treatments, and support groups. As such, they can play a significant role in advocacy and empowerment, helping you take charge of your mental health. Websites like the IOCDF maintain lists of peer support workers, yet you can also find them by searching the internet more broadly and through referrals from professional therapists.

Advocacy Groups

Advocacy organizations can also play a pivotal role in your support. These associations have programs focusing on education, awareness, support, research, and public policy related to OCD and mental health more broadly. While the IOCDF, based in the United States, remains

the flagship organization for OCD advocacy with affiliate groups in numerous states, there are similar organizations with the same mission in over 20 countries worldwide, including Canada, China, England, France, Nigeria, Norway, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden. Advocacy organizations also help bring together the OCD community by organizing events such as the IOCDF's annual OCD Conference and its One Million Steps for OCD Walk. These types of events offer opportunities to connect with others living with OCD, share experiences, and access the latest information about treatments and research. Becoming a member of an OCD advocacy organization is straightforward and comes with numerous benefits. By joining this organization, you gain access to a wealth of resources, including regular newsletters and exclusive online information and support. This membership not only connects you with a broader community, but also keeps you informed and supported in your journey.

Overcoming Obstacles to Seeking Support

Whether due to isolation, stigma, a lack of resources, or the presence of negativity, many people with OCD face significant obstacles in seeking the help and connections they need. Overcoming these barriers requires resilience and sometimes a creative approach to finding support in unexpected places.

Breaking the Cycle of Isolation

It's a vicious cycle: Social isolation exacerbates stress and anxiety, leading to more OCD symptoms and more isolation. To break out of this loop, you've got to actively seek supportive communities. Taking the initiative is key to forming meaningful connections, and involves actively reaching out and expressing interest in others, whether through starting conversations, inviting someone for coffee, or joining groups for people with common interests or concerns (such as support groups). This proactive approach sets the tone for mutual engagement

and potentially leads to new friendships and stronger bonds. Although reaching out can be intimidating and carries the risk of rejection, the benefits of developing communication skills and building relationships often make it worthwhile, as many successful relationships start with one person taking that crucial first step.

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

Online forums and support groups are particularly beneficial as they provide a platform where you can interact with others who truly understand the challenges of living with OCD. As mentioned earlier, they also offer anonymity and accessibility, making it easier if you're hesitant to engage in face-to-face interactions or if OCD symptoms prevent you from doing so. Additionally, many of these groups organize regular virtual meetups, webinars, and discussion sessions, which can be a great source of continuous support.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Maintaining and nurturing connections with friends and family are equally important. These relationships offer a different kind of support, grounded in personal history and emotional connection. Friends and family who are empathic and understanding can provide a sense of normality and stability, which is crucial for dealing with OCD. It's important to communicate openly with others about your needs and challenges, so you can help them understand how best to support you.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Engaging in social activities also plays a significant role in preventing isolation. While doing so may feel daunting, especially during periods of heightened anxiety, participating in social events can provide a much-needed distraction and a sense of belonging. Activities can range from informal gatherings, like coffee meetups or walks in the park, to more structured events like book clubs or hobby groups. What's important is to find activities that are enjoyable and not too overwhelming.

ROUTINE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Finally, establishing a routine of regularly scheduled social interactions can provide a sense of structure and predictability. They might include weekly phone calls with a friend, family dinners, or regular attendance at a local support group. The regularity of these interactions can help create a rhythm in your life, making socializing less daunting and more a part of normal routine.

Tackling the Fear of Revealing OCD

Chapter 6 discussed the advantages and disadvantages of sharing your OCD diagnosis, as well as strategies for how to do so. However, actually taking the step to talk about OCD can feel scary, and your apprehension can intensify the stress and anxiety linked with obsessions and compulsions. Here are some strategies to help you effectively surmount these worries.

START WITH SOMEONE YOU TRUST

One of the most effective ways to begin addressing this fear is to confide in someone you know will look out for your interests and well-being, like a close friend or relative. This person should be someone who has shown understanding and empathy in the past. The act of sharing your experience with OCD can be liberating and can significantly reduce the burden of carrying this secret alone. Start by expressing your feelings and experiences and let them know why you are sharing this experience with them. Their support and understanding can be a strong foundation as you gradually acquire the confidence to open up to a wider circle.

EXPAND YOUR CIRCLE GRADUALLY

As you become more comfortable discussing OCD-related issues, consider slowly expanding the circle of people you share this information with. Sharing more widely doesn't mean you have to tell everyone; rather, it's about identifying people you believe will be

supportive—friends, colleagues, classmates, or fellow members of your support group. Each positive experience of sharing your story boosts your confidence and lessens your fear.

BE PREPARED FOR RESPONSES AND REACTIONS

As discussed in Chapter 6 (in the section "Responding to Reactions"), prepare for questions or reactions people might have when you tell them about OCD. Think about common misconceptions and how you might address them. Preparing a few key points or facts to talk about can help you feel more in control. And remember, you are not obligated to answer every question. It's okay to set boundaries regarding what you are comfortable discussing.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION AND ASSERTIVENESS

Remind yourself that having OCD is not something to be ashamed of—it's a *part* of who you are, but it does not *define* you. Practicing self-compassion (as I described in Chapter 2) helps reduce feelings of fear and shame associated with disclosure. It's also important to be assertive about your rights. You have the autonomy to decide when, how, and to whom you disclose your OCD. If you encounter negative reactions, remind yourself that your openness is a sign of your strength and that not everyone may understand immediately. There's more about responding to negative reactions a bit later in this chapter.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

If the fear of revealing your OCD feels overwhelming, consider seeking support from a mental health professional. Therapists can provide you with tailored strategies to manage this fear and can also help you practice discussing OCD.

Breaking Free from Embarrassment and Stigma

Do feelings of embarrassment or the fear of social stigma hold you back from seeking and embracing the healthy social support you need?

Here's what you can do to overcome these challenges and build a supportive network.

EDUCATE YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Knowledge is the most powerful antidote to stigma. As already explained, educating yourself about OCD bolsters your confidence in discussing it with others. Understanding the nature of obsessions and compulsions, their prevalence, and the fact that OCD is a recognized mental health condition can help mitigate feelings of shame. Sharing this knowledge with those in your social circle can also foster a more understanding and supportive environment. When others understand what OCD entails, they're more likely to offer empathy rather than judgment.

PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

Flip back to Chapter 2 and make sure you're applying the strategies for developing self-compassion. Treating yourself with kindness and understanding and recognizing that OCD is not a flaw or weakness are absolutely essential to eliminating embarrassment as a barrier to developing your support network. Remember that OCD is a challenge many people face. Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

SEEK GUIDANCE

Here again, help from a mental health professional or OCD support worker can be instrumental. Clinicians and others trained to understand OCD can give you specific techniques to change negative thought patterns and enhance your self-esteem. They can also provide guidance on how to effectively communicate your needs and experiences to others, making the process of seeking support less daunting.

CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR CONNECTION

Actively seeking out supportive communities, whether online or in person, can significantly help in overcoming the barriers of embarrassment and stigma. Support groups for people with OCD can provide a sense of belonging and understanding. In these spaces, sharing

experiences with others who have faced similar challenges can normal-ize your experiences and reduce feelings of isolation.

Navigating through Negativity

Unfortunately, at some point in your journey with OCD it's likely you'll encounter unhelpfulness and disapproval. When dealing with people who are critical, judgmental, or otherwise unsupportive, you'll want to assess how much influence they have in your life so you can minimize their impact. If someone is especially detrimental to your well-being, it may be necessary to limit or end contact with them by setting clear boundaries. In cases where avoiding interactions isn't pos-sible, you'll want to find ways to focus on your own self-care despite the negativity. Here are some methods for putting your well-being first and steering clear of negative energy.

IDENTIFY YOUR "DOWNERS"

"Downers" are the people in your life who tend to lower your morale through their negative comments, pessimism, disapproval, criticism, or generally discouraging behavior. I'd be willing to bet you already know who your downers are. If not, identifying them is important because your interactions with them can significantly impact your journey toward living well with OCD. These unsupportive individu-als might be acquaintances, family members, or colleagues who fail to understand the complexities of OCD, contributing to feelings of isola-tion and discouragement. Think through these two questions:

1. Who are the people whose mere presence, or even the thought of being around them, has the power to put you in a sour mood?
2. How much do these people, and their negativity, impact your life?

REDEFINE THE PROBLEM

In situations where you encounter subtle or unintentional negativity that has little impact on you, the most helpful thing is often just a shift

in perspective: Remind yourself that the issue lies with the downer, not with you! Maybe they're dealing with personal issues of their own or haven't learned to think carefully about how their behavior affects others. In such instances, it might not be worth your time and energy to respond to the behavior at all. Instead, simply changing your viewpoint creates a mental buffer for yourself, which significantly reduces the stress and emotional impact of the negativity. You're acknowledging that while you can't control the downer's behavior, you *can* control how you make sense of it. This strategy can be a powerful tool in maintaining your well-being, especially in situations where you can't avoid interactions with downers. It helps you navigate through the situation with minimal stress and stay focused on your own wellness.

SET LIMITS AND BOUNDARIES

On the other hand, in cases where the impact is more significant, responding by setting clear boundaries becomes necessary. This might involve limiting your interactions with the person or, in some cases, ending the relationship. Setting boundaries is not a sign of weakness but a form of self-care and an assertion of your needs. Clear communication about these boundaries is key. Express the impact that the person's behavior has on you, being as direct yet as respectful as possible. Here are several examples of what you might say:

- I want to talk about something important. When you [describe specific behavior or action], it triggers my OCD symptoms. I need us to find a different way to handle this situation, so it's less stressful for me.

- I've noticed that our discussions about [specific topic] often leave me feeling anxious and worsen my OCD symptoms. I need to avoid these topics to keep my stress levels manageable. Let's focus our conversations on different subjects.

- I need your understanding of my OCD rituals. Commenting on them or rushing me makes my life harder. Please allow me the time I need to do these things, even if they seem unusual to you.

- I know you mean well with your suggestions about managing

my OCD, but sometimes it can be overwhelming. I'm follow-
ing professional advice, so let's focus *our* conversations on other
topics.

- When you make comments like [specific example], they can be
  hurtful and exacerbate my OCD symptoms. I'd appreciate it if
  we could avoid making light of my condition.

- I want to clear up some common misunderstandings about
  OCD. It's not just about being neat or orderly. When we talk
  about it, I'd appreciate it if we could stick to facts and avoid ste-
  reotypes, because I find them damaging.

- There are times when I need to be alone to manage my OCD
  symptoms. During these times I'd appreciate some space. I'll
  reach out when I'm ready to interact again.

Each of these examples shows how to communicate your needs
clearly and directly, yet respectfully, with the understanding that the
other person may not fully grasp the complexities of living with OCD.
The goal is to create a supportive environment where you can manage
your condition effectively without additional stress from interpersonal
interactions. It may also be helpful to seek support from a therapist or
counselor when preparing for and having these conversations.

USE TACT WITH AUTHORITY FIGURES

But what if your downer holds a position of power—such as a boss or
teacher—and it's impossible to avoid interactions with them? Dealing
with these situations requires a tactful approach that balances assertive-
ness with respect for authority. To this end, it's important to maintain
professionalism and use "I" statements to express how the negativ-
ity affects you, with a statement such as, "I feel overwhelmed when I
consistently receive negative feedback." You can also seek clarification
on their comments to understand their perspective better and focus
on problem solving rather than on direct confrontation; for example,
you could say something like "I appreciate your input. Could you
please provide some specific examples so I can better understand your
perspective?" If necessary, request a private meeting to discuss your

concerns and document any incidents in which their behavior adversely affects your work. Then, if applicable, seek advice from the human resources department or a trusted confidant or professional. If the situation doesn't improve, you might decide to consider your long-term goals and whether your work or school environment is the best one for your growth.

Navigating unsupportive relationships is a complex but essential aspect of achieving a satisfying quality of life with OCD. By assessing the influence of unsupportive individuals, setting boundaries, focusing on your own progress, engaging in self-care, and prioritizing your mental health, you can create a more supportive and understanding environment conducive to feeling fulfilled.

From identifying empathic individuals to nurturing these relationships and managing interactions with unsupportive people, this chapter has equipped you with strategies to build a resilient support system. Remember, establishing and maintaining healthy connections are key to reducing isolation, enhancing well-being, and lessening the grip of OCD symptoms. People you are already close to can be your biggest supporters, but as you probably know, within family settings you also have to deal with delicate dynamics. In Chapter 8 we explore how to disentangle the disorder's impact on family life and foster a supportive and understanding home environment.