

Dear 12 Step Program Sponsor,

Someone you sponsor has let you know they have OCD. What does this mean, and how can you help? Research has shown that a range of 15% to 40% of people with OCD will have a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) depending on the study. With the wide spread availability of 12 Step programs its not uncommon for an individual who has both OCD and SUD to attend meetings as part of their recovery.

What is OCD? OCD is a mental health diagnosis that often starts with obsessions, that is, unwanted thoughts or feelings. All people have unwanted thoughts at times. In fact, unwanted thoughts or feelings related to using substances are also very common for people in early recovery from SUD. With OCD the person believes they need to engage in a compulsion or ritual to reduce their anxiety. While all humans have intrusive unwanted thoughts at times. The difference for those with OCD is they cannot get the thoughts, images, or urges, out of their head unless they do something to get certainty that their obsessions don't signal a genuine threat.

For instance a person who has obsessions over illness or germs may wash their hands, but not just wash them the way people without OCD wash them. They may wash their hands for 20 -30 minutes to be sure. The person you sponsor arrives at a meeting and is greeted with handshakes and/or hugs.

- Now imagine having an obsession about germs after shaking hands with 5-10 people before a meeting starts. You would feel like you had to wash your hands to remove the germs and miss the 1st 20-30 minutes of the meeting. This is just one example of OCD. Let's give one more example.

You're sitting in a meeting and the person you sponsor seems very anxious. They say "On the way over I heard a bump against the car and I think I might have I hit someone."

- They leave the meeting to drive the same route they took to the meeting to make sure they did not hit someone. The reality is the worry thought about having hit someone is an OCD obsession. Even though there's no evidence that an accident occurred, your sponsee will miss the meeting while doing the compulsion or ritual of checking to may sure they didn't hit anyone.

These are two examples, though OCD can show up in many ways. A person may have obsessions questioning if they had a drink or used a drug without remembering and, therefore, are not in recovery. Other obsessions can involve fears that they might hurt someone else, a loved one or a child. Keep in mind that people with OCD are not violent. They are actually very distressed and anxious about these intrusive unwanted thoughts/obsessions.

OCD will often attack what is most important and valued, leading to obsessions around health, relationships, responsibility, and recovery. This is one of the reasons OCD can be disabling for some.

How can you help as a 12 Step sponsor? Learn a little about OCD. There are some great resources you can access:

- The International Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Foundation (IOCDF) www.iocdf.org
- OCD/SUD Special Interest Group www.ocdsud.com

As a 12 Step sponsor you have your experience, strength, and the hope of recovery to share with those you sponsor. Do all the standard things a sponsor does, encourage meetings, step work, and service work. Just know that more will be needed for recovery to be achieved and maintained.

The person you are sponsoring will need professional help to treat and recover from OCD. A therapist specially trained to treat OCD is needed since not all therapists can provide the treatment needed. The IOCDF website has a treatment locator on their website, and a program called NOCD (www.treatmyocd.com) offers virtual therapy if no professionals who are local have the needed training to treat OCD.

The primary type of treatment for OCD is known as Exposure and Response Prevention or ERP for short. During treatment the person with OCD will be “exposed” to the cause of their obsessions, (e.g. germs, driving), and encouraged to not engage in the compulsion(s)/ritual(s), (washing hands or checking for accidents) as “response prevention”.

Just as people in 12 Step meetings learn how to deal with emotions without using substances. In ERP therapy the person learns to live with anxiety without doing compulsions through exposure and response prevention. ERP is a difficult type of treatment, though it is highly effective for treating OCD and produces good outcomes. The person you are sponsoring may have more anxiety during treatment and need additional support with their SUD recovery.

Here are some terms and definitions:

Obsession: An intrusive, unwanted thought, image, feeling, urge or sensation that is repetitive and causes anxiety or discomfort.

Compulsion: A behavior done to get rid of obsessions, anxiety, discomfort, disgust and/or uncertainty. Behaviors include observable acts (e.g. checking a door lock, washing hands), avoidance of triggers, mental compulsions (e.g. analyzing thoughts, reviewing situations, general rumination) and Reassurance Seeking (see below)

Reassurance Seeking: A compulsive behavior wherein people with OCD excessively ask others questions in order to gain certainty about an obsession.

ERP: The gold-stand treatment for OCD, ERP, or Exposure and Ritual Prevention, helps people to learn to tolerate the presence of triggers, obsessions and distress without engaging in compulsive behaviors.

Recovery: A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.

Substance Use Disorder (SUD): Mild, moderate or severe impairment or distress caused by the use of substances. Diagnostic criteria include difficulty controlling or limiting use, craving, preoccupation with obtaining a substance, interference with familial, professional and social obligations and functioning, continued use despite consequences, withdrawal and dependence.

We hope the information and the resources provided here are helpful.
Recovery from OCD and SUD is possible!

OCD/SUD Special Interest Group

