

## Helpful Hints for Parents of Children with OCD

- ♥ *Label OCD and use its name when talking about it with your child - make OCD the problem not your child*
  - By externalizing OCD, we see it as a bully ("the bad guy") that is bossing around your child and you and your child ("the good guys") are learning how to boss back.
  - Externalizing the OCD will help your child's self-esteem as OCD is then seen as separate and not your child's fault, but instead it is the brain playing tricks on your child.
  
- ♥ *Be a cheerleader and ally to your child when fighting back OCD - help motivate your child as s/he bosses back OCD*
  - Parents' support and presence while your child is learning new ways to respond to OCD is extremely important and will help reduce anxiety.
  - Believe in your child and that s/he can fight back and win against OCD. Practice kindness and patience.
  - Praise or reward brave behavior - using an incentive program is important as it is extremely hard for your child to do the opposite of what OCD is telling him/her to do - we all need to be rewarded for challenging tasks.
  
- ♥ *Model and help child accept "good enough" and uncertainty rather than needing to be "perfect" or 100% sure*
  - OCD is known as the doubting disease and it needs your child to be certain that whatever s/he is afraid of will not happen - so help your child accept that their fear "may or may not happen or be true" as no one has a crystal ball to tell the future and there is no such thing as "perfect".
  
- ♥ *Provide gradual exposure to feared situations in a baby step fashion with calm encouragement*

- ♥ *Allow your child to experience negative emotions - as recovery is an up and down process - feeling anxiety is extremely unpleasant for your child but it is not dangerous*
  - Support your child's feelings of negative emotions and help manage these emotions by reminding your child that these uncomfortable feelings will subside on their own as long as s/he does not give into OCD - remind them to agree with OCD and that as uncomfortable as it is, it is not unbearable and that you are present for your child.
  - Remind your child that there will be situations where OCD will win and that is OK too.
  
- ♥ *Create a safe and supportive environment*
  - Provide structure and routine in your child's life, such as morning and bedtime routines (as long as the routines are not according to OCD)
  - Set reasonable rules and limits in order to provide your child with a sense of security and predictability
  - Ensure that your child has enough sleep, proper nutrition and regular exercise - these lifestyle changes help reduce stress and that will help reduce anxiety and hopefully OCD symptoms
  
- ♥ *Use your child's tool kit to communicate about OCD with your child*
  - Ask your child when you see him/her struggling, what number s/he is on the fear thermometer (anxiety scale). Use the number as a guide as to how you will respond to the given situation.
  - Model talking back to OCD in a way that sits with uncertainty
  - Have your child use the journal to note new triggers
  - Have your child keep track of the times that s/he is brave and able to win against OCD in the Brave Behaviours List
  - Instead of telling your child what to do, remind him/her that s/he is in control and can fight back OCD. Remind your child to use the toolkit and that s/he has the tools to take back control.

## What Not to Do

- x *Constantly reassuring your child is you completing their compulsion for them, it does not allow him/her to experience the anxiety subside on its own.*
  - The more you provide reassurance for your child, the more it will be needed. Reassurance does not stick so you will have to keep giving it and the more you do - the stronger OCD becomes.
  
- x *Suggesting that your child's feelings are not important or real and minimizing his/her distress*
  - It is hard for you to understand what your child is feeling because your brain is not sending you a danger alert, but your child's feelings are 100% real, even if the fear is a "maybe" danger.
  
- x *Allowing your child to avoid the feared situation/object makes OCD stronger*
  
- x *Rescuing your child from his/her negative emotions*
  - Your child needs to learn that the danger signal from their brain is a false alarm and in order for that to happen, your child's amygdala needs to feel that the situation is not dangerous and needs to experience the anxiety subside on its own without any interference or interruption of that process.
  - Accept that there will be good and bad days in the battle against OCD and that it is OK to feel frustrated or angry.
  
- x *Over diagnosing all behaviors as OCD*
  - Sometimes parents attribute all (negative) behaviours as a ritual or a response to OCD, but the truth is that there will be times that your child is just being a kid and acting up or choosing to act in a certain way. Ask your child, don't assume.

- x *Use of criticism and punishment to stop rituals - if your child could stop the rituals, s/he would*
  - Telling your child to "just stop" or using critical or hostile type language (e.g., ridicule, name calling or even teasing) will make OCD worse, as it will cause your child to feel pressure and increase his/her stress levels and OCD thrives on stress and it will result in a greater need to do the ritual.
  
- x *Rationalizing with your child about the fear, trying to talk him/her out of it or explain its irrationality*
  - Believe it or not, arguing with OCD (by trying to be logical) does not work, it is what OCD wants you to do. OCD wants you to disagree with the obsession because then it can cast more doubt. You cannot win an argument against OCD as it will bring back doubt and guilt and keep the argument going. Agree with the uncertainty of the fear.
  - When your child's amygdala sends out an alarm signal (false or real), that fear will always override your child's ability to think logically, so it does not work to try to talk your child out of his/her fear.

## Other Helpful Considerations

- It is important for children/adolescents to return to usual routines as soon as possible.
- Integrate fun activities, hobbies, time with friends in daily life.
- Pay close attention to sleep/wake cycle. Lack of sleep can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety/OCD.
- Be aware of food considerations, caffeine, sugar and how they affect your child's OCD symptoms.
- Relaxation/breathing exercises and other calm activities for your child's brain are helpful to reduce stress, and lower stress will reduce anxiety and OCD symptoms - so incorporate them into your child's day.