

A NEW HARBINGER SELF-HELP WORKBOOK



The

Mindfulness  
Workbook  
for OCD

A Guide to Overcoming Obsessions AND  
Compulsions Using Mindfulness  
AND Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

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# Contents

Foreword	vii
Introduction	1

## PART 1 Mindfulness and OCD

1 The Brain, the Mind, and You	7
2 Mindfulness and Cognitive Therapy	25
3 Mindfulness and Behavioral Therapy	41
4 Mindfulness and Compulsions	59

## PART 2 MBCBT for Specific Obsessions

5 Acceptance, Assessment, Action	81
6 Contamination OCD	85
7 Responsibility/Checking OCD	99
8 Just Right OCD	109
9 Harm OCD	117
10 Sexual Orientation OCD (HOCD)	129
11 Pedophile OCD (POCD)	141
12 Relationship OCD (ROCD)	153
13 Scrupulosity OCD	165

14	Hyperawareness OCD	177
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PART 3  
Mindfulness, OCD, and You

15	Sharing Your OCD Experience	189
16	Mindfulness and Staying on Track	197
17	Getting Help	207
	Resources	211
	References	215

# Relationship OCD (ROCD)

OCD likes to go after big targets, whatever matters most to you. This could be your sense of morality, your sexuality, your kids, or your health, and for many of us, our relationships hold such a high value in our lives that OCD can't keep its hand off them. *Relationship OCD* (ROCD) is difficulty in tolerating uncertainty about the quality of a relationship and the genuineness of your feelings about another person. This isn't the typical doubt you might expect when, say, one person is ready for marriage and the other isn't. This is the kind of doubt that seeps in insidiously and chips away at the very concept of love and fidelity. If you suffer from ROCD, you feel as if you are in a double bind, where your primary source of comfort and security in the world (your partner) becomes your primary source of anxiety. The OCD says that if you don't follow its arbitrary and impossible-to-satisfy rules, the relationship falls apart, and not only that, it's your fault—and not only that, the person you love most in this world suffers more than you do.

Obsessive fears in ROCD typically include:

- *What if I don't really love my significant other?*
- *What if the relationship is going to fail and I need to get out now?*
- *What if my partner doesn't know enough about me to make an informed decision about being with me?*

- *What if I would be a better match with someone else?*
- *What if I can't stop thinking about things that trigger me about my partner (for example, a physical attribute, the person's sexual past, philosophical differences)?*
- *What if I am not as attracted to my partner as I should be?*

What types of thoughts and feelings does your ROCD present you with?

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Typical compulsions in ROCD include:

- Mental review of everything pertaining to the relationship
- Compulsive confessing of doubts about the relationship
- Seeking reassurance about the relationship
- Mental checking of emotions associated with the relationship
- Scenario bending or theorizing about alternatives to the relationship as it is
- Avoidance of situations that trigger relationship obsessions (for example, trying not to notice attractive people, avoiding participating in discussions about sex or relationships, avoiding being alone with triggering people)

What types of compulsions do you engage in to get a sense of certainty about your relationship?

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# “You’re My One in a Million”

As with any OCD issue, the truth is that your worst fears *could* be true but obviously are *not*. Probably—that is, it cannot be proven with 100 percent certainty that your fears are basic nonsense, but the evidence supporting their *being* nonsense is readily available. Yet relationships seem to demand acceptance of particularly high levels of uncertainty. Your partner may be gone tomorrow. You may choose to go tomorrow. There very well may be someone out there who’s a better match, presuming there’s a clear definition of “better” and “match” for you to work with.

If your partner is one in a million, congratulations! That means that on a planet of seven billion people, there are seven thousand potential life mates who would make you very happy indeed. So what do you make of this? Nothing. You go on with your life, happily connected to someone you cannot prove is *the one*, calling that person “the one,” feeling him or her as “the one,” and letting go of the need for absolute certainty. Just as your hands are “clean” after a good wash, you are still not absolutely *certain* they are clean, and contamination OCD aside, you’re okay with that.

## Acceptance Tools for ROCD

Relationships are to be *experienced*, not calculated. OCD will use the argument that without proof, there’s no love, and without love, there’s no relationship. This is just another of the disorder’s tricks designed to get you to act on compulsions. Acceptance of relationship fears doesn’t mean that you should accept abuse or force yourself to stay with a person you despise. To accept intrusive thoughts about your partner and the legitimacy of your relationship is to accept that part of the experience of connecting your life with that of another person *necessarily involves discomfort*.

Remaining steadfast in the not-knowing stance is quite challenging, especially when the OCD is bullying you to investigate, analyze, figure out what you need to do, and make sure it gets done now before catastrophe occurs. Without OCD, people doubt, fight, worry, and sometimes choose to go separate ways. OCD demands the impossible by asking you to decide *right now* what to do while *blocking* you from staying present with what’s happening in your relationship long enough to have any sense of what *to do*! In that state of urgent uncertainty, you are a slave to the OCD and will do compulsion after compulsion to attempt escape.

Making matters worse, another human being is directly involved. There's a sense of responsibility for how the other person's life turns out. The fear that you stayed with the wrong person not only makes you hate what you've allowed yourself to become, but also makes you feel fully responsible for the choice your partner made to be with you.

As in other forms of OCD that don't display a high frequency of physical compulsions, mindfulness skills are an important part of separating the presence of the unwanted thought from the urge to review or seek reassurance. Part of mindful acceptance for ROCD is sitting with the discomfort that your partner and others may perceive you as being something quite different from what you are. For example, you may obsess about the image of your partner with his or her ex, thereby appearing to others to be a jealous person. But it's not the feeling of jealousy that drives your constant need for reassurance and mental review. It's the feeling that something is off that could somehow be made *right* if only you could get that last compulsion satisfied! It just *looks* like jealousy on the outside.

Similarly a person with obsessional fears that a relationship won't last may appear to others to be seeking a way out of that relationship. To the contrary, the incessant mental review of the situation is designed to generate a feeling that will allow you to stay *with* the person you love! So the mindfulness challenge here is to not only view your own thoughts and feelings as simply passing by, but also accept the thoughts and feelings you may have about being misunderstood by others.

## *Genuine Love vs. Checked Love*

One of the most common mindfulness challenges in ROCD stems from the intrusive question, *Do I love my partner?* A classic example for the ROCD sufferer might be a man who sees his wife walk by and becomes aware of the thought, *She is so beautiful. I'm a lucky guy. I love my wife.* Then the OCD responds with, *Is that really love? Are you sure?* Taking the bait, the man might start purposefully thinking about the meaning of "love" and digging deeply into his mind to see if he can generate a *feeling* of love. He can. But because this feeling is generated by checking, or by force, what he ends up with in his mind is a synthetic version of the feeling of love. It looks like love, but it falls just short of seeming authentic. *See? Things are not as they seem,* says the OCD. The man may begin to notice his anxiety rising and dig again to see if he genuinely, truly, *really* loves his wife or has just been conning himself to believe so all these years. He digs it up again, but just ends up with another hologram, a synthetic version of the synthetic version of his true deep feelings! It's a nightmare! He begins to overattend to the gap between the "real" love he felt when he

first fell for his wife and the “synthetic” feeling of love he is conjuring up in his mind. The gap widens and becomes the most important idea to respond to anytime it’s present in the mind. And it’s present at all times! The OCD is now his master.

The lesson learned from this story is that you cannot have a genuine emotional experience while checking for a genuine emotional experience. This is why you can’t tickle yourself. You know you’re doing it! Mindfulness for ROCD means letting go of the authenticating urges and accepting feelings of love as they are, unchallenged. The same goes for feelings of confusion and doubt about love. The goal is to allow yourself to experience these feelings, not to make sure they are fitting into the boxes where you think they should go.

**Practice:** What thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, or other internal data do you believe you will need to mindfully accept as you alleviate your relationship OCD?

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## Meditation Tips for ROCD

If you choose to use daily meditation as part of your mindfulness training for ROCD, remember that meditation practice is not about trying to make sense of your relationship. To the contrary, what you want to practice in meditation is coexistence with things not making sense. The OCD drives you to treat every doubtful thought or feeling about your relationship as if it must urgently be resolved before everything falls apart. Meditation, as a practice of mindfulness, is about letting yourself sit and watch things fall apart. Let your thoughts and feelings crash into one another and create explosions in your mind. Notice them. Do not ignore them. But resist the urge to analyze or sort them out. Simply glance at them as they happen, and then return to your meditation. *I may be doing this whole meditation thing to make it okay that I don’t feel in love. Wait. That’s thinking. I don’t need to do that right now. I’m breathing in, and I’m breathing out. There are thoughts about my relationship happening. That’s fine. I don’t mind. They can happen while I let myself stay here with my inhaling and exhaling. Maybe later I’ll go back to all the mental review. That might be just fine. But in this moment, I’m going to practice staying here.*

# Assessment Tools for ROCD

You may find yourself noticing that when things are great, they're great. But when your OCD is running the show, everything feels as if it's about to crumble. You're about to leave your partner, or your partner is about to leave you. Or worse, you're doomed to an eternity together in which you are smothered with regret and doubt. Watch out for these distortions in particular:

**All-or-nothing:** *I must always feel 100 percent in love with my partner, or else we're wrong for each other.* The reason why this is a complete OCD setup is that no one is capable of doing this. Feelings aren't set in stone for all time. They are fluid. They evolve, expand, shrink, and shift constantly, as they are supposed to.

**Catastrophizing:** *If I don't know for certain that I'm with the right person, my life and my partner's life will be ruined.* Here again, you need to remember that the end or changing of a relationship isn't the end of the world, even if it's the biggest fear your mind is presented with. So not only is the future of a relationship unpredictable, but also the worst predictions would be experienced in ways that are unknown.

**Selective abstraction:** *I can't look at that mole forever!* Mindfulness, like love itself, is about taking in the bigger picture of yourself, not picking at the details. When you fall into a *romance*, you actively ignore the negative details that may be thrown at you. When you actually fall in *love*, you begin to see those negative details, but they are no longer negatives. You love these details for being a part of the person you love.

**Mind reading and personalizing:** *She doesn't think I'm smart. She didn't respond to my text message, because she knows our relationship is a sham.* Here you fall for the trap of assuming that others' thoughts are accessible and knowable and that others' behavior has intrinsic meaning. Neither of these things is true.

**Hyperresponsibility:** *I have to tell my partner that I would have considered cheating on him if the opportunity presented itself, even if I can't prove this. I have to do this, because if I don't, he will spend the rest of his life married to a person who may not be worthy of his love, and I'll be responsible for his wasting his chance to be with the right person.* As in other forms of hyperresponsible thinking, the OCD makes it look as if you are charged with the task of ensuring that your partner makes the right choices in life, which isn't something you can control.

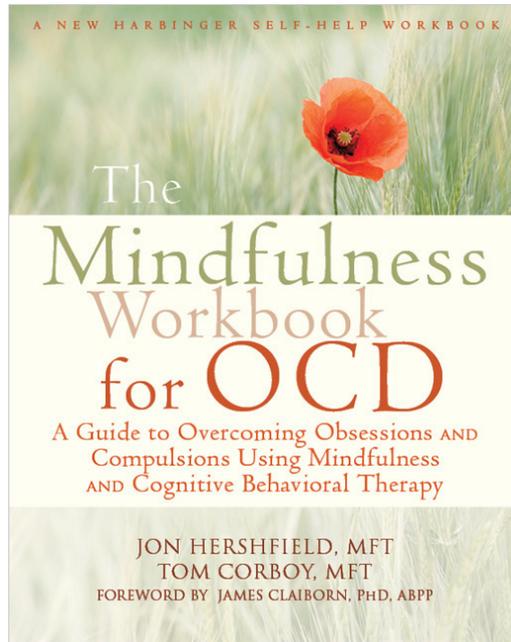
What types of cognitive distortions are at play in your ROCD?

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**Practice:** Try doing some automatic thought records on situations that trigger your ROCD thoughts. See the following sample automatic thought record.

## Sample Automatic Thought Record

<b>Trigger</b> what set you off?	<b>Automatic Thought</b> what is the OCD saying?	<b>Challenge</b> what is an alternative to the distorted thinking?
<i>Noticing attractive person at work.</i>	<i>I must know for sure that this person is less attractive to me than my partner is. If I think this person is attractive, I have to tell my partner that I thought this.</i>	<i>Engaging in mental rituals won't give me any useful information and will only promote more obsessing. If this person has features I admire, that's fine, and I don't know what it says about my feelings for my partner. Compulsively confessing my thoughts to my partner is just my way of trying to avoid feeling discomfort. It always comes back to bite us both in the end, and I'm better off using my mindfulness skills on this one.</i>



Combining mindfulness practices with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), this workbook offers practical and accessible tools for managing the unwanted thoughts and compulsive urges that are associated with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Learn to develop present-moment awareness, challenge your distorted thinking, and stop treating thoughts as threats and feelings as facts.

*The Mindfulness Workbook for OCD*  
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