Understanding Your OCD Cycle

A worksheet for mapping how obsessions and compulsions reinforce one another

Purpose: This worksheet helps you identify the sequence that keeps OCD going so treatment can focus on the places where a different response is possible.

1. The Reinforcing Cycle

Step	What happens
Trigger	A thought, situation, sensation, image, memory, or uncertainty appears.
Obsession / doubt	The mind treats the trigger as important, threatening, or urgently unresolved.
Distress	Anxiety, guilt, disgust, uncertainty, tension, or a sense that something is not right increases.
Compulsion	You check, avoid, review, confess, reassure, neutralize, repeat, research, or perform another ritual.
Short term relief	The distress or uncertainty may decrease temporarily.
Long term learning	The brain learns that the trigger required a compulsion, making the cycle more likely to repeat.

2. Map One of Your Cycles

Trigger: What happened internally or externally?

Obsessive thought, image, doubt, or question:

Understanding Your OCD Cycle

What emotion or body response showed up?

Compulsion or safety behavior:

What relief or certainty did the compulsion provide in the short term?

What did the cycle teach OCD in the long term?

3. Look for Hidden Compulsions

[ ] Mental review [ ] Reassurance seeking [ ] Researching [ ] Checking memories

[ ] Repeating words/prayers [ ] Neutralizing thoughts [ ] Avoidance [ ] Testing feelings

[ ] Comparing [ ] Confessing [ ] Body checking [ ] Trying to feel certain

Other rituals that are easy to miss:

Understanding Your OCD Cycle

4. Where Can the Cycle Change?

ERP does not require preventing intrusive thoughts. The change point is often what you do after the trigger appears.

What would it look like to allow the trigger or doubt to be present without solving it?

Which compulsion could I reduce, delay, or leave undone?

What meaningful activity could I return to while uncertainty remains?

5. A Different Learning

Complete the sentence: I may not be able to know for certain that _____, and I can still _____.