Explanations of obsessive-compulsive disorder

Lesson 3.5.2 | Clinical psychology

Core ideas

Biological explanations focus on genetic vulnerability, brain circuits and neurotransmitters linked with anxiety, habit and inhibition.

Serotonin is often discussed because it is linked with mood and anxiety regulation, but it is not a complete explanation by itself.

Cognitive explanations suggest intrusive thoughts become obsessions when the person gives them exaggerated meaning or responsibility.

Inflated responsibility can make a person feel they must prevent harm, even when the actual risk is very low.

Behavioural explanations suggest compulsions are maintained because they reduce anxiety in the short term.

A fuller explanation can combine vulnerability, intrusive thoughts, threat interpretation and negative reinforcement of rituals.

Key terms

Genetic vulnerability: Inherited risk that may increase the chance of developing OCD.

Serotonin: A neurotransmitter linked with mood and anxiety regulation.

Brain circuit: A connected set of brain areas working together.

Intrusive thought: An unwanted thought that enters awareness repeatedly.

Inflated responsibility: Feeling overly responsible for preventing harm.

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Threat interpretation: Judging a thought or situation as more dangerous than it is.

Negative reinforcement: A behaviour becoming more likely because it reduces distress.

Maintenance: The process by which symptoms continue over time.

Undoing: A proposed defence in which an act symbolically cancels an unacceptable thought or impulse.

Isolation of affect: A proposed defence separating an idea or memory from the emotion associated with it.

Further detail and evidence

Compare both biochemical and genetic explanations with cognitive, behavioural and psychodynamic explanations. Genes indicate susceptibility rather than inevitability; neurotransmitter evidence must not be treated as proof of a single cause.

The cognitive account concerns thinking errors such as inflated responsibility and overestimating the meaning or danger of intrusive thoughts. The behavioural account explains how anxiety relief negatively reinforces repeated rituals.

The psychodynamic account proposes that unconscious conflict creates anxiety and that defensive rituals symbolically manage it; explanations can include undoing or isolation of affect. Evaluate its difficulty of objective testing alongside the strengths and limits of competing accounts.

Use individual/situational explanations, nature/nurture, reductionism/holism, determinism/free will and idiographic/nomothetic approaches to compare explanations rather than merely listing them.

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Biochemical explanations link symptoms with neurotransmitter processes including serotonin; genetic explanations propose inherited vulnerability. Family or twin similarity is relevant, but environment and measurement complicate the inference. Drug response is compatible with biological involvement without demonstrating a sole chemical cause.

Cognitive accounts propose that ordinary intrusive thoughts become especially distressing when interpreted as dangerous, significant or a sign of responsibility. Thought-action fusion treats thinking about an event as morally equivalent to, or increasing the likelihood of, the event.

Behavioural maintenance: a compulsion temporarily removes distress, which negatively reinforces it. Psychodynamic accounts instead interpret rituals as defences against unconscious conflict: undoing symbolically cancels an unacceptable impulse, while isolation separates a thought from its emotional meaning.

Applying the ideas

A person believes that failing to check a lock makes them responsible for any burglary. Checking reduces anxiety immediately, strengthening future checking. This sequence links a cognitive appraisal to a behavioural consequence; it does not show that the person freely chose to develop the original intrusive thought.

Evaluation and connections

Cognitive and behavioural accounts predict changes that can be tested during ERP. Psychodynamic interpretations provide personal meaning but are harder to falsify objectively. A reductionist neurotransmitter account may miss the content of the obsession; a purely psychological account may miss vulnerability. Compare evidence and explanatory level.