

A Spouse's Pivotal Role

(Note: The use of the term "spouse" in the article below is meant to include any two individuals who are in a relationship.)

Being the spouse of an individual who is struggling with OCD can be extremely difficult, for so many different reasons. Perhaps you've had to take on what feels like more than your fair share of household responsibilities. Maybe you now have to do all the cleaning and laundry due to your spouse's contamination fears. Or perhaps your spouse has fears of certain numbers and can no longer write checks, pay bills, or balance bank statements. And those responsibilities have fallen squarely on your shoulders.

Your social relationships and social activities may have taken a hit, as well. The rituals your spouse has to complete before leaving the house make it difficult, if not impossible, to attend social events. Or due to irrational fears, your spouse can't even go out in public. You feel guilty if you go to parties or engage in other activities by yourself. You may also find yourself feeling lonely and isolated from people who once held important places in your lives. And you end up feeling frustrated, angry, or even betrayed. Rest assured that this reaction to your spouse's OCD is not unique. Loving partners who find OCD invading and taking over their lives experience a wide range of emotions.

By reading this web site, you've already taken a positive step toward helping your loved one overcome OCD. Don't stop now. Remember that no one wants to live a life ruled by OCD. You can be highly influential and effective in helping your spouse gain control over this oftentimes heartbreaking disorder.

Why Me? Why Now?

Those are good questions. But not surprisingly, they have no easy answers.

In some cases, people who develop OCD symptoms as an adult had OCD at some time in their past – before they met their spouses – but were successful in getting control over their symptoms. It's also possible that your spouse was genetically predisposed to the disorder, and it was triggered by stress or an illness after you got married. Traumatic brain injury can even trigger OCD or OCD-like symptoms. It's even possible that your spouse hid his or her OCD from you because of embarrassment or, worse yet, because the thought of losing you – if you came to know about the OCD – would be too difficult to bear.

In any case, OCD is neither the fault of the person who develops it nor the fault of a spouse. It's no one's fault. OCD is an anxiety disorder that, like all anxiety disorders, is neurobiological in nature. (You can remind each other of this by refreshing your understanding of the physiology of OCD in the OCD Facts or Individuals sections of this web site.) So it does no good to blame each other for the presence of OCD. In fact, blaming can be counterproductive, if not harmful.

What's most important is that you avoid dwelling on negative thoughts and concentrate on finding a cognitive behavior therapist who can treat your spouse. Many doctors are not familiar enough with OCD to recommend Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). But since CBT, sometimes in combination with medication, is the only scientifically-supported treatment for OCD, don't let anyone talk you into another alternative. While psychotherapy, couples counseling and other treatments may help individuals with issues they're experiencing because of the OCD, they do not treat the OCD itself. Nor do hypnosis, herbal or homeopathic remedies, relaxation therapy, eye movement desensitization reprocessing (EMDR) or dietary changes. With OCD, urge (don't nag) your spouse to seek and participate in CBT.