



Does Your Character Have Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder?

This was the fifth time Mark had re-written the report and *still* it wasn't good enough. Not right. Not perfect.

His co-workers kept going on and on at him to let someone else go over it so that they could move on with the project, but he just couldn't do that. They wouldn't be able to do it right. He had to rewrite it again, even if that meant skipping his breaks to do it, even if that meant missing their deadline, even if it meant his job was at risk. It *had* to be perfect.

But it never would be. Mark didn't realise how incredibly strict his standards were, or recognise the strain and frustration he was causing his co-workers, or believe that he had a problem. In his mind, his actions and thought process were completely normal, totally acceptable, and not at all a pattern of thinking indicative of something called obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD).

What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder?

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OCPD is a **Cluster C personality disorder** distinguished by a preoccupation with perfectionism, orderliness and rigid control.

It's important here to note the difference between obsessive-compulsive personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). **These are not the same thing.** In fact, most people with OCD don't meet the criteria for OCPD and exactly why that is will be covered in-depth a little later, as well as in the upcoming articles on obsessive-compulsive disorder.



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Diagnosing Personality Disorders

WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND

Remember: personality disorders are **pervasive, enduring** and cause **distress**. That means:

- 1** | Your character's thoughts, feelings and behaviours affect different areas of her life. They don't come and go, depending on the situation, or only show up in certain circumstances. They're pervasive and inflexible.
- 2** | The characteristic features your character experiences endure over time. So, if your character has a brief, one-off episode of certain symptoms, she wouldn't be classed as having a personality disorder.
- 3** | Personality disorders can impair your character in some way or stop her doing certain things. They can also cause psychological distress. In other words, your character's feelings are troubled, confused or out of the ordinary—not a pleasant situation to be in.

To be diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, your character must display **four or more** of the eight characteristic features covered over the next few pages. Which of the features does your character experience?

Important to Note

The information in this guide comes from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5). It **should not** be used to diagnose yourself or others, nor is it intended to be a substitute for professional advice. If you have any questions about the diagnostic criteria in relation to yourself or others, please consult a qualified clinical professional.

Feel free to use this information to diagnose your characters, however. That's what I made this workbook for!

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 1

Is preoccupied with details, rules, lists, order, organisation or schedules, so much so that the major point of the activity is lost.

If your character experiences this characteristic feature of OCPD, he is excessively careful, pays extraordinary attention to detail and is prone to repetition, such as repeatedly checking for possible mistakes. He may also allocate time poorly, leaving the most important tasks until the last moment. As was the case with Mark, the people around him may become very annoyed at the delays and inconveniences his painstaking approach causes, though your character will probably be oblivious to their irritation. In short, his perfectionism and self-imposed high standards of performance cause a real problem in his life and present a great source of distress for him personally.

An example of such behaviour? Say your OCPD character misplaces his to-do list. Instead of rewriting it from memory and going on to complete his tasks, he'll spend an inordinate amount of time looking for the list, which could cause some major frustration for the other members of your cast and very little time for him to complete his to-do list.

OCPD & Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

It's easy to get these two confused, but the clinical manifestations of these disorders are really very different. Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is characterised by its maladaptive pattern of excessive perfectionism and rigid control. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), however, is characterised by intrusive thoughts, images or urges (called "obsessions"), or by repetitive behaviours the individual performs in response to these intrusions (the "compulsions").

The source of anxiety and fear that people with OCPD and OCD feel differs too. For those with OCD, the anxiety stems from their specific obsessions, whereas in OCPD, anxiety stems from their maladaptive and dysfunctional pattern of thinking.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 2

Shows perfectionism that interferes with completing a task.

Your character's obsession with perfection may be so great that he becomes so wrapped up in making every detail just right that he never finishes his project. In the process, he misses his deadlines and the parts of his life that aren't the current focus of the activity could fall into disarray. This can extend to social situations too, with your character holding himself back until he's sure whatever he says will be perfect.

Our character Mark provides another example of this characteristic. He spends so long rewriting his report, trying to achieve perfection, that his deadlines fly by, his free time is sacrificed and his job is in jeopardy.

OCPD, Narcissistic & Antisocial Personality Disorders

Key characteristics of obsessive-compulsive and **narcissistic personality disorder** (NPD) are a commitment to perfectionism and a belief that others can't do things as well as they can. However, people with NPD are likely to believe they've achieved perfection, while people with OCPD are more self-critical in nature.

Another distinguishing feature of OCPD concerns generosity. Though individuals with narcissistic and **antisocial personality disorder** (APD) lack generosity, there's a tendency to indulge themselves. In contrast, people who experience Criterion 7 see no such distinction, adopting a miserly spending style toward both themselves and others.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 3

Is excessively devoted to work and productivity to the exclusion of leisure activities and friendships.

It's important to note here that this devotion isn't because of economic necessity. Your character doesn't spend so many hours working because he has monetary issues—it's because it's part of who he is.

As a result of all this work, he may feel like he doesn't have time to take an evening or weekend off to relax or go on an outing, and he might keep postponing a fun activity, like a holiday, so much that it never happens. This can have considerable repercussions on the significant others in your character's life. When he *does* take time off, he might feel uncomfortable unless he has something on hand to work on so that he's not "wasting time."

Your character may also concentrate excessively on household chores, like repeatedly cleaning the floor so that "you could eat off it." If he chooses to spend time with his friends, it's likely to be during some sort of organised activity, such as sports, and these hobbies or recreational activities are usually viewed as serious tasks that require careful organisation and hard work to master.

Notice the pattern? The emphasis is placed on perfect performance. Fun activities like play are turned into structured tasks, like correcting an infant for not putting rings on the post in the right order, or telling a toddler to ride his or her tricycle in a straight line, or turning a baseball game into a harsh "lesson." It's all about perfectionism, to the exclusion of leisure and relaxation.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 4

Is overconscientious, scrupulous and inflexible about matters of morality, ethics or values.

If your character shows this characteristic, he may force himself and those around him to follow rigid moral principles and very strict standards of performance (values we saw evidence of in Criterion 3), with his own mistakes leading to merciless self-criticism. This inflexibility can't be due to your character's cultural or religious identification if he's to meet this criterion, too.

In line with his strict principles, he's likely to be deferential to authority, rigidly obey rules and insist on a quite literal compliance with both. No exceptions or rule-bending for extenuating circumstances here. Example? Your character won't lend money to a friend who's out of cash and needs to make a phone call because "neither a borrower nor a lender be" or because it would be "bad" for his friend's character.

When the rules and procedures he so stringently follows don't dictate the correct answer, it may fall to him to make decisions, which can become a time-consuming and painful process.

OCPD & Schizoid Personality Disorder

Both obsessive-compulsive and schizoid personality disorder (a Cluster A personality disorder) are characterised by an apparent formality and social detachment, but the difference lies in where this emotional distance comes from. For individuals with OCPD, it stems from the discomfort emotions cause and an excessive devotion to work; for individuals with schizoid personality disorder, it stems from a fundamental lack of capacity for intimacy.

Remember: If your character meets the criteria for one or more personality disorders, they can be diagnosed with all of them. Just make sure the characteristic features fit together and have a basis in reality before you decide which disorders will co-occur.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 5

Is unable to discard worn-out or worthless objects even when they have no sentimental value.

Is your OCPD character a pack rat? Then that puts a check in the box for this characteristic feature. He views discarding his belongings as wasteful, even if they have no apparent practical or sentimental value, because you never know, he might need it one day. Should his spouse or housemates complain about the lost space and try to get rid of the things he's saved, he could become intensely distressed—a recipe for conflict in your story.

What kind of things might your OCPD character hoard? It could be old parts, magazines, broken appliances... the list goes on. If his hoarding is in the extreme—as in, his mountain of belongings presents a fire hazard or makes it difficult for others to walk through the house—then he could be diagnosed with **hoarding disorder** alongside his obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

OCPD & Hoarding Disorder

When hoarding behaviour is in the extreme, then **hoarding disorder** could be diagnosed alongside OCPD. If your character experiences Criterion 5 to this extent, you should make sure you know what's what with the diagnostic criteria for hoarding disorder as well.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 6

Is reluctant to delegate tasks or to work with others unless they conform exactly with his ways of doing things.

This stubbornness can lead to an unreasonable insistence that everything be done your character's way. He might give extremely detailed instructions on exactly how things should be done and express surprise or irritation if others suggest creative alternatives. In his mind, there's one and only one way to mow the lawn, load the dishwasher, build a desk, and so on.

Of course, your character might reject offers of help altogether, even if he's behind schedule, because he believes that no one else can do it right. Mark, our example character, had this problem when creating his report—though his colleagues offered to help, he insisted on doing it all himself, convinced they couldn't do it properly. Take a moment to think of the repercussions of this kind of behaviour and how that could affect your OCPD character's life.

Associated Features of OCPD

In situations where your character can't maintain control of his physical or interpersonal environment, he can become upset or angry, though his might not be expressed directly. For instance, if he's angry about poor service at a restaurant, instead of complaining to the management, he might brood over how much money to leave as a tip. Other times, his anger might burst out as righteous indignation over something seemingly minor, like someone not cleaning the windows in the right way.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 7

Adopts a miserly spending style toward both himself and others, with money being viewed as something to be hoarded for future catastrophes.

It may not be just objects your character hoards—it could be money too. His reluctance to spend money can lead to him living at a standard far below what he can afford, and this attitude extends to other people too. Much like Criterion 4, he applies his beliefs about money to others and holds them to the same standards as himself.

How could this characteristic manifest in your story? Maybe your OCPD character insists on him and his spouse keeping to a strict, stingy budget, despite their considerable income. Maybe he lives alone in a small flat, despite the fortune sitting in his bank account. Maybe it's something smaller, like refusing to buy something unless it's on sale, despite being financially secure.

Associated Features of OCPD

As control means a lot to your character, he may be especially attentive to where he stands in dominance-submission relationships, being excessively deferential to authority figures he respects. But to authority he doesn't respect? That deference can swiftly become resistance.

Affection is typically expressed in a highly controlled or stilted way, so your character may feel very uncomfortable around people who are emotionally expressive. The formal, serious quality of an OCPD character extends into his everyday relationships as well, and he may be stiff in situations that would make others happy, like when greeting a lover after a long trip. This stiffness can lead to difficulty expressing tender feelings and it's probably a rare occurrence for him to pay someone a compliment.

Diagnosing OCPD

CRITERION 8

Shows rigidity and stubbornness.

As you've probably noticed by now, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is characterised by excessive rigidity and stubbornness. For example, a character with OCPD may plan ahead in meticulous detail and refuse to consider any changes to his plans. He's probably seen as a "control freak" by others and that's not surprising when he believes that there's only one correct way to do things—*his way*.

In fact, he might be so focused on the rightness of his methods that he has trouble going along with anyone else's. To take that a step further, he may have trouble even *acknowledging* viewpoints other than his own, being so tightly wrapped in his own perspective. This constant rigidity can frustrate his friends and colleagues and cause serious strain in his relationships.

What if your character has to compromise? Even if he recognises that it's in his best interests to do so, he could still stubbornly refuse, arguing that it's "the principle of the thing." And, as we saw in Criterion 4, his principles could well be something he follows no matter what.

A Note on Gender Differences in OCPD

Twice as many diagnoses of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder are in men, which is why I've referred to your character as 'he' throughout this workbook. That doesn't mean to say, however, that OCPD isn't found in women too. Just because my example character for this post—Mark—is male doesn't mean yours has to be too.

The Moral of the Story...

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Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is characterised by a need for perfection and control so overwhelming that it dominates a person's life and the lives of those around him.

It's also *not* the same as OCD, so make sure you know clearly how the two differ before you start writing about it. I'd recommend the upcoming post, [How to Tell If Your Character Has Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder](#), for that task.

Happy writing.

Want more information on this topic? Head over to the [Personality Disorder](#) series on Writerology or check out the references below.

Further Reading

American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

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