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4 Tips for Surviving ‘Germy’ Season

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As an OCD specialist, I notice that this time of year brings a tremendous amount of stress to most of my patients, regardless of where they are in their healing journey. Between the various types of influenza floating around and frequent social events, encountering germs seems inevitable. Whether it’s the fear of contracting an illness, spreading an illness, ruminating over what you said at a family outing, the fear of trying other people’s foods, or obsessing over your holiday outfit being just right: OCD has a ton of different avenues to hijack your holiday experience. Here are a few tips for making it through (without giving in to your compulsions).

1. Frequent Self-Check-Ins

Self-check-ins have two purposes:

First, they help pull your brain out of emotional reasoning and into something more logical. Having to name a feeling and assign a number to it uses a different part of the brain than what is currently activated when you feel overwhelmed, helping you to regulate quicker.

Second, they give you information about what you might need. Are you feeling an 8 on the anxiety/SUDS scale? *Eeek!* It might be time to step outside for a breath of fresh air and some water. Feeling a 2? *Not bad!* Maybe you can stick around for another 30 minutes or try talking to someone new. By checking in with yourself frequently, you help balance your brain chemistry and prevent a potential emotional meltdown or Irish goodbye.



2. Practice Mindfulness

It can be easy to get caught up in obsessional thinking patterns, and when stress levels increase, so do intrusive thoughts. Staying in the moment is the best way to manage these thoughts, without allowing them to take over your holiday experience.

First, notice the intrusive thought and give it a moment of attention by naming it: *“I am having the intrusive thought that I just said something offensive to my grandmother. I am feeling anxious and unsure.”*

Second, talk back to it like it’s a bully: *“That’s a lie. It’s just my OCD tricking me. Knock that off.”*

Finally, divert your attention and thoughts back to the present moment by describing something you can see, taste, hear or smell in a factual way. *“I can see my grandma is wearing a brown sweater, has her hair tied back, is sitting in her chair by my dad, and is drinking a cup of tea. I can smell cookies in the air and I can hear ‘A Christmas Story’ playing on the TV.”*

Practicing mindfulness keeps you tied to the present moment, while decreasing the likelihood that intrusive thoughts will continue or increase.

3. Don’t Take on Any Extra Challenges

The holiday season is probably not the best time for challenging your OCD symptoms (unless this is something that you and your therapist have planned out and prepped for together). If you’re already feeling stressed about your work holiday party, attempting to resist a new compulsion or change a behavior during the event could leave you feeling frustrated and disconnected. It’s already challenging enough to be in a positive mood when feeling constantly triggered, so why set yourself up for more stress? When we conduct exposure therapy, we initially do it in a non-stressful environment, in a very structured and scaffolded way that promotes success. Practicing ERP while taking your kids to see Santa Clause may not be the best choice. Instead of making any big changes, try mastering mindfulness as mentioned above.



4. Attempt to Decrease Stress Outside of Triggering Situations

If you show up to an event with a regulated nervous system, it will likely take you longer to reach a breaking point. If you show up already dysregulated, you really aren't giving yourself a fair chance. I love to think of small ways to increase self-care during busy times. You would be surprised how quickly one's stress level can plummet with a few extra moments of self-care thrown into your day. Whether it's spending an extra 5 minutes in the shower, take a moment to practice gratitude, saying 'no', eating a protein-filled breakfast, complimenting a stranger, squeezing in an extra session with your therapist, delegating a task, or lighting your favorite holiday candle, every ounce helps. We know that OCD and stress are highly correlated, so by focusing on stress-reduction techniques, you are also focusing on OCD symptom reduction.

