

Understanding OCD and Waswas al-Qahri

A Psychoeducation Resource for Muslim Clients

OCD Is Not a Sign of Weak Iman

OCD is a clinical condition characterised by unwanted intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and behaviours or mental acts performed to relieve the distress those thoughts cause (compulsions). Classical Islamic scholarship recognised this condition centuries before contemporary psychology, calling it waswas al-qahri (overpowering whispers).

“That is clear faith.”

Sahih Muslim 132.

Your distress at the thought is itself evidence that the thought is not native to you.

Why doing the compulsion makes OCD worse

The OCD Cycle (and How ERP Breaks It)

Why doing the compulsion feeds the obsession



Classical scholars called this waswas al-qahri. Their guidance, remarkably, anticipated modern ERP.
Brain learns: "threat was real"

The brain learns: 'I had to do the compulsion to neutralise the threat, therefore the threat must have been real.' The obsession returns stronger. ERP breaks this cycle by tolerating the anxiety without doing the compulsion.

Section 1: The Two Parts of OCD

Obsessions

Unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges that cause distress. They are ego-dystonic: they feel foreign and are usually the opposite of what the person values.

Compulsions

Behaviours or mental acts to reduce distress or prevent a feared outcome. For Muslim clients these often involve repeating wudu, repeating prayers, mental rituals to neutralise blasphemous thoughts, or seeking religious reassurance.

Section 2: Common Presentations

Wudu OCD

Repeated washing, doubts about completeness, redoing wudu multiple times.

Salah OCD

Repeating Al-Fatihah or takbir, restarting prayer, mental reviewing.

Najasa OCD

Persistent contamination worry, repeated washing, avoidance.

Tawhid and creed OCD

Intrusive blasphemous thoughts, doubts about Allah, mental rituals.

Moral and harm OCD

Intrusive thoughts about harming, repeated ethical review, excessive seeking of religious rulings.

Relationship OCD

Doubts about marriage, attraction, or feelings.

Section 3: Classical Islamic Guidance

Scholars including Ibn Qudamah and Ibn al-Qayyim addressed this condition explicitly.

Ignore the doubt

The principle al-yaqin la yazulu bi-shak: certainty is not removed by doubt.

Do not repeat

Scholars warned against giving in to repetition urges.

The blasphemous thought is not sin

“Allah has forgiven my Ummah what they think to themselves, as long as they do not act on it or speak it.”

Sahih al-Bukhari 2528; Sahih Muslim 127.

“Let him say: I believe in Allah, and let him stop.”

Sahih al-Bukhari 3276; Sahih Muslim 134.

The Prophetic instruction is brief affirmation and disengagement, not repeated mental argument.

Section 4: Treatment: Exposure and Response Prevention

ERP involves gradually facing the situations or thoughts that trigger obsessions, without performing the compulsions.

For Muslim clients this looks like

- Doing wudu once, accepting the doubt, and praying anyway
- Saying takbir once and beginning prayer
- Allowing intrusive thoughts to pass without arguing
- Limiting religious-ruling seeking to once
- Sitting with the discomfort of uncertainty

Section 5: What Does Not Help

- Repeating wudu, prayer, or other acts to satisfy doubts
- Seeking the same religious ruling repeatedly
- Arguing mentally with intrusive thoughts
- Mental rituals to neutralise blasphemous thoughts
- Avoiding triggering situations entirely
- Constant reassurance seeking

Section 6: Seeking the Right Help

- Symptoms taking an hour or more daily
- Interfering with work, study, family, or worship
- Repeating wudu or prayer significantly
- Intrusive thoughts causing daily distress

In a clinician, look for

- Specifically trained in ERP
- Understanding of religious presentations
- Willing to work alongside scholars where appropriate

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

“Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear.”

Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:286.