

Introduction to Mental Compulsions

What is a Mental Compulsion?

A mental compulsion is a behavior that is done in the mind. Mental compulsions are done in an effort to reduce or remove one's obsession. Obsessions can present as a thought, feeling, sensation, urge, or image. Commonly, people engage in mental compulsions to manage uncertainty, anxiety, doubt, or another form of discomfort. It often involves “solving” an uncertainty or neutralizing an obsession.

Mental Compulsion Vs. Mental Ritual?

For the sake of this series, we use the word “mental compulsion” and “mental ritual” interchangeably.

Who does Mental Compulsions?

Lots of people do mental compulsions. However, mental compulsions are commonly performed by people with obsessive-compulsive disorder, [generalized anxiety](#), [social anxiety](#), [phobias](#), [health anxiety](#), eating disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Note: There is no clear or clinical differentiation between the different mental compulsions. This list is the list that we use with our patients at my private practice. Your therapist may use different terminology. That’s all fine. What really matters is that you can identify what mental compulsion you are doing so you can quickly intervene.

Types of Mental Compulsions

- ☐ **Mental Repeating-** Repeating or making a list of individual items or categories. This can involve words, numbers, or phrases.
- ☐ **Mental Counting-** Counting words, letters, numbers, or objects.
- ☐ **Neutralization Compulsions or Neutralizing Compulsions-** replacing an obsession with a different image or word to neutralize the obsession. May also involve compulsive prayer.
- ☐ **Hypervigilance Compulsions-** scanning of the environment or one's sensations, thoughts, or emotions for signs of danger, for potential problems, or proof that fear will not happen.
- ☐ **Mental Reassurance-** mentally checking to confirm an obsession is not or will not become a threat. Includes mental staring and mental hoarding.
- ☐ **Mental Review-** reviewing and replaying *past* situations, figuring out the meaning of internal experiences. E.g., What is the meaning of the thought I had? What is the meaning of the feeling I had? What is the meaning of that sensation? What is the meaning of an image that just showed up intrusively and repetitively in my mind? What is the meaning of an urge I have?
- ☐ **Mental Catastrophization-** mentally going over all of the potential terrible, catastrophic situations. Mental catastrophization is reviewing the past but is also the future and reviewing every possible catastrophic scenario or opportunity that happened.
- ☐ **Mental Solving-** anticipating *future* situations with or without potential what-if scenarios. Very similar to catastrophization compulsions. This is where you're looking into the future and asking, "What if this happens?" and going through multiple, sometimes dozens of scenarios of the worst-case scenarios on what may or may not happen.
- ☐ **Mental Self-Punishment-** criticizing, withholding pleasure, harshly disciplining yourself for your obsessions or even the compulsions that you've done. This compulsion is sometimes also done in an effort to prevent us from having the obsession or the compulsion in the future.
- ☐ **Mental Comparison-** comparing your own life with other people's lives, comparing your own life with the idea that you thought you should have had for your life or an idea of how your life was supposed to be.