

February 2016

Briefing on negotiating for Members with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

What is OCD?

OCD affects about 1-2% of the population and is characterised by intense anxiety and by negative, repetitive and intrusive thoughts (obsessions). In order to reduce the anxiety, the affected person will often engage in repeated actions or behaviours (compulsions). OCD is considered a disability under the Equality Act if it has an adverse and substantial long-term effect (lasting over twelve months) on a person's normal day-to-day activity¹.

An HE Lecturer says:

My OCD has often affected my working life, I have often had feelings of panic and terror related to my specific obsession, and this has prevented me from giving lectures and/or writing which are two of the most important elements of my job; sometimes I have often had to repeat tasks, such as writing lectures, until I feel they are 'safe' or perfect.

An FE Lecturer says:

I gave up teaching because I felt I had to do the paperwork for lesson observations perfectly. Unnecessary bureaucracy and over-detailed procedures were OCD-like in themselves and made matters worse. I spent much time on the tortuous detail, for fear of a low assessment. The anxiety spilt over into other aspects of my life and caused harm.

People with OCD will often resourcefully work out ways to manage at work. A researcher says:

--- I try to allocate time to specific areas in terms of my mood: I have tasks for when I'm overly anxious and can't concentrate, and tasks for when my mind is racing so hard and so freely that I can write pages of

my PhD in just a couple of hours. On the rare occasion that my thoughts are quiet, I take time to read and to catch up on my research area, the aspect of the PhD that my OCD gets in the way of the most².

The benefits of diversity

Often associated with OCD are a sense of responsibility, intelligence, a concern to act ethically and avoid harm to others, and a desire to do things very well and with attention to detail. These are excellent traits in teaching, administration, research and other roles of UCU members in FE and HE.

There are great contributors to knowledge who have had OCD, such as Nikola Tesla, who invented the alternating current induction motor and who had a contamination obsession leading to a compulsion to use eighteen napkins (as a multiple of three) to clean his tableware.

Disclosure

It may not be apparent to colleagues that someone has OCD, and people with OCD may hesitate to disclose for fear of a negative response. One of the things that can make OCD difficult to talk about is that the 'obsessions' are not always easy for other people to understand. People with OCD know this and can even feel ashamed. For example, an employee received a verbal warning for taking too long over tasks when in fact they were repeatedly checking their own work, but did not want to let the employer know this. To be able to ask for reasonable adjustments, the member would need to disclose; but it is of course their choice.

Reasonable adjustments that would remove barriers for members with OCD

A good workplace

It is beneficial for people with OCD, and for all staff, to have a workplace that is inclusive and flexible, with reasonable workloads and expectations, no bullying and harassment, recognition of different ways of doing things, appreciation of the contribution and diverse skills of different individuals, availability of support as wanted (but not intrusive micromanagement), and where staff are allowed to flourish and develop. Therefore we as a union need to encourage management to establish or maintain such a work environment.

OCD can be triggered or exacerbated by bullying, excessive bureaucracy and unnecessarily stressful performance management procedures. These are also harmful to staff in general.

Awareness of OCD

Awareness-raising sessions and disability policies which refer specifically to OCD are needed. These can then be referred to when seeking a flexible working arrangement for a member with OCD.

Specific adjustments for members

These are potentially very varied, but possibilities include:

- Time off work to access a support group or therapy
- A change in work tasks, a flexible approach as to when different tasks are done, a move to a less stressful environment, etc.
- A buddy system – a trusted colleague to discuss anxieties with.
- Disability leave
- A managed return to work

References

1. For a more detailed definition see

<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/definition-of-disability>

2. OCD versus PhD: A Life in Two Halves. 2014

<http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/academia-and-mental-health/obsessive-compulsive-disorder/>

Contacts

www.ocdaction.org.uk

www.ocduk.org.uk

This was developed by UCU's Disabled Members Standing Committee

Please look on the UCU website www.ucu.org.uk/equality for more resources on disability equality.

If you wish to comment on this briefing, please email:

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