

The Invisible Rituals Field Guide

Recognizing mental compulsions and responding differently with ERP
and ACT.

Felix Murad, M.Ed., LPC-S, LMHC, CMHC, NCC

Licensed Professional Counselor • Licensed by the Texas Behavioral Health Executive Council

www.muradcounseling.com • Telehealth for adults in TX, WA, NH, and FL (out-of-state registration)

What Are Mental Compulsions?

Most people picture OCD as washing and checking. But for many, the rituals are invisible: performed silently, inside the mind, sometimes hundreds of times a day. Nobody sees them. Often the person doing them does not recognize them as rituals at all. They feel like thinking.

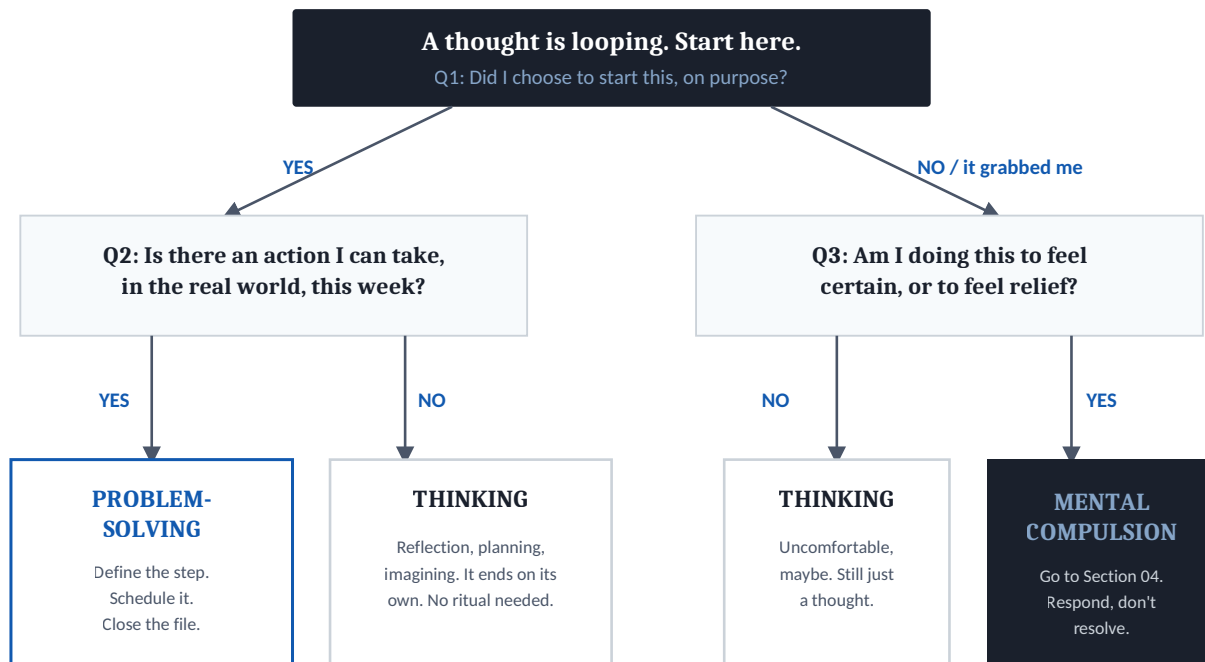
They often feel like productive thinking, but their function is different. They are attempts to answer an internal alarm and make an intrusive thought, image, doubt, or feeling go away. Each one works for a moment, which is precisely the problem.

- 01 Rumination.** Grinding on a question to reach mental certainty. Feels like analysis; functions like a ritual.
- 02 Mental reviewing.** Replaying events to verify what happened, what you did, or what you meant.
- 03 Self-reassurance.** Telling yourself it is fine, you would never, it does not mean anything. On repeat.
- 04 Checking feelings.** Auditing your emotions for the right amount of love, attraction, grief, or guilt.
- 05 Checking memories.** Testing whether the memory is complete, accurate, and still says what it said an hour ago.
- 06 Figuring it out.** Treating an unanswerable question as a puzzle that one more round of effort will solve.
- 07 Neutralizing.** Replacing a bad thought with a good one, un-thinking, or mentally undoing.
- 08 Compulsive prayer.** Prayer used to cancel a thought or secure certainty, distinct from prayer as connection or practice.
- 09 Replaying conversations.** Re-running what you said, how they looked, and what it must have meant.
- 10 Comparing.** Measuring your thoughts, feelings, or relationship against other people's, for evidence.

Why these keep OCD alive. Every ritual delivers a moment of relief, and relief teaches the alarm that the thought was dangerous enough to need one. The response to the obsession teaches the brain that the thought required special attention, making the alarm more likely to return. This is the core finding of decades of exposure research: rituals maintain the fear they answer.

Thinking, Problem-Solving, or Compulsing?

Three mental activities can look identical from the inside. One diagnostic pass, three questions:



The tell:

Problem-solving moves toward a decision or action. Compulsing repeatedly returns to the same demand for certainty or relief. If you keep reopening the same question after reaching the best available answer, the process may be functioning as a compulsion rather than useful problem-solving.

YOU DO NOT NEED TO CLASSIFY EVERY THOUGHT CORRECTLY. If you repeatedly return to this decision tree about the same question, the decision tree may have become part of the ritual. Stop classifying and return to Notice • Name • Allow • Choose • Move.

OCD's Favorite Questions

Obsessions rarely announce themselves. They arrive dressed as reasonable questions, and each question is an invitation to ritualize. The content changes by theme; the invitations are the same five.

“What if?”

The opener. It sounds like planning. But it points at outcomes no plan can control, so the only available "answer" is a ritual: review, reassure, neutralize, repeat.

“What does this mean?”

The meaning trap. A thought occurred; the question insists it must be a message about who you are. Analysis begins, and analysis of an intrusive thought is rumination with a diploma.

“Am I sure?”

The certainty audit. You were sure a moment ago. Checking dissolved it, because checking always dissolves it. Memory and feelings degrade under interrogation like any witness.

“What if I’m wrong?”

The stakes-raiser. It converts an ordinary uncertainty into a moral emergency, which makes the ritual feel like responsibility instead of compulsion.

“Should I think about it one more time?”

The closer. One more round always feels like the last one. It has never once been the last one. This question is not asking permission; it is the ritual already starting.

The move is the same for all five: these questions do not need answers. They need a different response. That response is on the next page.

The Response: Notice · Name · Allow · Choose · Move

One framework, drawn from ERP and ACT. It is not a trick to feel better. It is a practiced way to stop feeding the loop while your life keeps moving. Anxiety is allowed to remain present the entire time.

This framework is a flexible practice, not a sequence that must be completed perfectly. If following the steps becomes another rule or checking routine, simplify: notice the pull and take one values-consistent action.

NOTICE

Catch the shift. Not the thought itself, the pull that follows it: the lean toward reviewing, checking, or figuring out. The earlier you notice, the cheaper the exit. The goal is not to notice perfectly. It is simply to notice sooner than you used to.

NAME

Label the process, not the content. "That's the doubt question." "That's a review starting." Naming shifts you from inside the loop to beside it. Keep it to five words.

ALLOW

Let the thought and the anxiety be there, unanswered, like weather. Allowing is not agreeing. It is declining to fight, which is what starves the alarm of evidence that fighting was needed.

CHOOSE

One question, and it is not "is the thought true?" It is "what matters to me in the next ten minutes?" Values are the compass here precisely because certainty is unavailable.

MOVE

Do the valued thing with the discomfort in tow. Attention will get pulled back; return it, gently, as many times as needed. Every return is a repetition of the skill. That is the exposure.

What this is not. Not suppression (you are not pushing the thought away). Not distraction-as-escape (you are moving toward something, not running from). Not reassurance (nothing here answers the question). The question stays open. You stay in motion.

The Choice Point

Every intrusive thought creates a fork. Both paths are always available, and choosing badly a hundred times does not remove the fork from the next thought. This diagram is the whole guide in one image.



The Daily Practice

Four prompts, once a day, sixty seconds. No symptom scores, no anxiety ratings, no evidence collection. This is a record of choices, not a court transcript. If a day is blank, the day is blank.

What showed up?

What ritual did OCD want?

What value mattered right then?

What did I choose?

Complete is enough. This page does not need a perfect answer.

Honest entries include "I ritualized for an hour." That entry is data and practice, not failure. Print this page; the rest of the guide does not need reprinting.

Recovery is not proving the thought wrong.

Recovery is living your life while the question remains unanswered.

One warning, because this guide would be incomplete without it: any tool can be recruited by OCD. If you notice yourself re-reading these pages to feel certain you understood them, checking the decision tree about the same thought again, or consulting the framework the way you once consulted reassurance, that is the loop, holding the guide. Read it, use the practice, and let the guide sit on the shelf. It says the same thing tomorrow. The guide will not become more certain or more convincing by reading it again.

This guide is education, not assessment, diagnosis, or treatment, and it is not a substitute for therapy. If you are in crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline).

Felix Murad, M.Ed., LPC-S, LMHC, CMHC, NCC · Licensed Professional Counselor

Murad Counseling PLLC · www.muradcounseling.com · Free 15-minute consultation

Version 1.0 · July 2026 · © 2026 Murad Counseling PLLC. For personal use; not for republication.