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The Emotional Architecture of Pediatric Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
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Abstract

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) affects up to 3-4% of children and adolescents and is impairing, persistent, and often chronic. The recommended treatments are only modestly effective and the psychological and neurobiological mechanisms involved in the disorder and treatment change remain under examined. Here I present four studies aimed at investigating the emotional processes underlying pediatric OCD. Emotion is a core mechanism in human behavior and evidence suggests that OCD has a highly heterogeneous emotional base. However, the disorder is often conceptualized as a pure anxiety disorder, which is mirrored in the first-line treatment for pediatric OCD: exposure plus response prevention, a form of cognitive behavioral therapy. In the four studies presented, the emotional processes of harm avoidance, incompleteness, and disgust, all of which have been linked to OCD in adults, are examined in children and adolescents seeking treatment for OCD. The results suggest that pediatric OCD is a highly heterogeneous disorder in terms of emotion-related processes. Harm avoidance, incompleteness, and disgust all contributed to the heterogeneity of OCD symptoms and were associated with disorder severity, symptom expression, psychiatric comorbidity, age, gender, and age-at-onset. Incompleteness was the emotional process most strongly associated with OCD and predicted treatment outcome. A better understanding of the emotional processes involved in OCD may build a foundation for more effective and personalized prevention and treatment.