

Dopamine Balance During OCD Treatment

Your Guide to Understanding and Supporting Natural Brain Chemistry

Understanding Your Brain During OCD Treatment

When you're working hard to manage OCD - whether through therapy, medication, or intensive programs like the one you're in - your brain chemistry is going through big changes. This is completely normal! Your brain has been getting dopamine (the "reward" chemical) from compulsions and checking behaviours. As you work to reduce these through ERP and other support, your brain is learning new ways to feel good, but this transition period can feel really challenging.

This handout will help you recognise when your dopamine levels need support and give you natural tools to boost them while you're actively working on your OCD.

▼ Signs Your Dopamine May Be Low

Mental & Emotional Signs

- **Lack of motivation** - Things that used to interest you feel boring or overwhelming, even when OCD symptoms are being addressed
- **Difficulty feeling pleasure** - Food, music, activities don't bring the same joy they used to
- **"Life feels flat"** - You're working hard on OCD but everything else feels grey or muted
- **Procrastination** - Starting tasks feels impossibly difficult, separate from OCD avoidance
- **Low mood** without depression - Not sad, just... empty
- **Difficulty concentrating** - Mind feels foggy or scattered beyond OCD intrusive thoughts
- **Emotional overwhelm** - Big reactions to small problems, emotions feel too intense
- **Increased sensitivity** - Criticism feels devastating, taking things too personally

Physical Signs

- **Fatigue** that doesn't improve with rest
- **Craving stimulants** - Needing more coffee, energy drinks, or seeking that "hit" from vaping
- **Sleep problems** - Trouble falling asleep or feeling rested (beyond OCD-related sleep issues)
- **Low energy in the morning** - Takes hours to feel awake
- **Restless legs** or difficulty sitting still
- **Reduced appetite** or comfort eating patterns

Behavioural Signs

- **Seeking instant gratification** - Shopping, social media scrolling, vaping, substances
- **voiding challenging tasks** - Putting off anything that requires effort (different from OCD avoidance)

- **Increased screen time** - TV, phone, gaming feel more appealing than active pursuits
- **Social withdrawal** - People feel like too much effort
- **"Going through the motions"** - Doing what you need to do but feeling disconnected

⚠ **Common Dopamine-Seeking Behaviours during OCD Treatment**

When you're actively working to reduce compulsions through therapy, your brain often unconsciously seeks dopamine through other means. This is your brain trying to fill the neurochemical gap left by the compulsions you're learning to resist.

You might notice yourself:

- **Smoking or vaping more** - Nicotine provides quick dopamine hits when compulsions are resisted
- **Gambling or risk-taking** - Online betting, lottery tickets, impulsive purchases
- **Compulsive shopping** - Buying things you don't need for the momentary high
- **Binge eating** - Especially sugary or high-fat foods
- **Gaming or social media binges** - Hours lost to scrolling or playing games
- **Caffeine dependency** - Needing multiple energy drinks or coffees daily
- **Substance experimentation** - Cannabis, prescription misuse, or other substances

Why this happens during OCD treatment:

Your brain was getting dopamine from checking, reassurance-seeking, or other compulsions. When ERP therapy teaches you to resist these behaviours (which is exactly what you should do!), your brain doesn't automatically know where to get that neurochemical reward. It seeks the quickest, easiest sources available.

This is NOT a moral failing or treatment failure - it's normal brain chemistry during recovery.

Understanding this pattern helps you make conscious choices about healthier dopamine sources while you're doing the hard work of OCD treatment.

⚠ **Signs Your Dopamine May Be Too High**

This can happen when:

- Your OCD is very active and you're doing lots of compulsions (getting frequent dopamine hits)
- You're using multiple stimulants (caffeine + energy drinks + vaping)
- You're in a high-stress period with increased checking/reassurance-seeking
- You're using substances that artificially spike dopamine

Mental & Emotional Signs

- **Restlessness or agitation** - Feeling wired but not productive
- **Racing thoughts** - Mind jumping from idea to idea (beyond normal OCD thoughts)
- **Increased anxiety** - Feeling more on-edge than usual
- **Irritability** - Small things trigger big reactions
- **Feeling "manic"** - Unusually high energy or excitement
- **Hyperfocus** - Getting stuck in compulsion cycles for hours
- **Obsessive thinking escalation** - Can't stop thoughts even after compulsions

Physical Signs

- **Jittery or shaky** - Like you've had too much caffeine
- **Heart racing** or palpitations during or after compulsions
- **Difficulty sleeping** - Mind too active to wind down
- **Jaw clenching** or teeth grinding
- **Digestive upset** - Nausea or stomach discomfort
- **Sweating** - During checking episodes or reassurance-seeking

Behavioural Signs

- **Compulsion "binges"** - Checking for hours without being able to stop
- **Rapid-fire reassurance-seeking** - Asking the same questions repeatedly in quick succession
- **Impulsive decisions** - Buying things, making plans without thinking them through
- **Talking very fast** or interrupting others
- **Starting "safety" projects** but not finishing them
- **Increased risk-taking** - Driving fast, financial decisions, etc.

✿ Natural Ways to Boost Dopamine

Movement & Exercise

Why it works: Exercise naturally increases dopamine production and can you're your brain feel rewarded without compulsions.

What to try:

- **Dancing** - Put on music and move for 10-15 minutes
- **Walking** - Especially outdoors in nature
- **Gardening** - Because you love it
- **Bike Riding** - That fixed up bike you've been meaning to try
- **Strength training** - Even bodyweight exercises count
- **High-intensity intervals** - 30 seconds hard effort, 30 seconds rest, repeat 5-10 times
- **Yoga** - Particularly energising styles like vinyasa

Start small: Even 5-10 minutes of movement can help. Build gradually.

Achievement & Accomplishment

Why it works: Completing tasks triggers natural dopamine release - this can help replace the "reward" from feeling compulsions.

What to try:

- **Make daily "win" lists** - Write down 3 things you accomplished each day (no matter how small)
- **Break big tasks into tiny steps** - Each small completion gives a dopamine hit
- **Visible progress tracking** - Charts, photos, before/after comparisons
- **Learn something new** - New skills activate reward pathways
- **Tidying or organizing** - Completion feels satisfying
- **Cooking** - Creating something delicious is naturally rewarding

Pro tip: Make tasks just challenging enough to feel satisfying when complete, but not so hard they trigger OCD perfectionism or overwhelm.

Novelty & Creativity

Why it works: New experiences naturally increase dopamine without relying on compulsions

What to try:

- **Ride your Bike – Perfect example of novelty + achievement**
- **Try new routes** – Walk or drive somewhere different
- **Explore new music** or podcasts
- **Visit new places** - Even a different coffee shop or park
- **Creative projects** - Drawing, writing, crafts, photography
- **Cooking new recipes** - Especially from different cultures
- **Learn new skills** - Language apps, online tutorials, how-to videos
- **Rearrange your space** - Change your environment

Make it easy: Novelty doesn't have to be expensive or time-consuming. Small changes count and can provide healthy dopamine without triggering OCD planning compulsions.

Social Connection

Why it works: Social bonding releases both dopamine and oxytocin, helping your brain feel good naturally.

What to try:

- **Quality conversations** - Really listening and sharing with others (like in your OCD group program)
- **Group activities** – Your ERP program is perfect for this
- **Helping others** - Volunteering or small acts of kindness
- **Playing games** - Board games, card games with friends/family
- **Sharing meals** - Eating together is naturally bonding
- **Physical affection** - Hugs, hand-holding with loved ones

Remember: Quality matters more than quantity. One meaningful interaction beats several surface-level ones.

Nutrition for Dopamine

Why it works: Your brain needs specific nutrients to make dopamine, especially important during OCD treatment stress.

Dopamine-supporting foods:

- **Protein-rich foods:** Fish, eggs, beans, nuts
- **Tyrosine-rich foods:** Almonds, avocados, bananas, apples
- **Iron-rich foods:** Leafy greens, lean meat, pumpkin seeds
- **Folate sources:** Spinach, asparagus, Brussels sprouts
- **Antioxidant foods:** Berries, dark chocolate, green tea

Meal timing:

- **Include protein at breakfast** - Supports morning dopamine
- **Avoid blood sugar crashes** - Eat regularly, include fibre
- **Stay hydrated** - Dehydration affects brain function
- **Limit processed foods** - They can disrupt natural reward systems

Note:

This is especially important for you as a vegetarian – getting those blood tests to check B12 and iron levels will help optimise your dopamine production!

Sleep & Recovery

Why it works: Dopamine receptors regenerate during deep sleep, crucial when you're doing intensive OCD Work.

What to try:

- **Consistent sleep schedule** - Same bedtime and wake time daily
- **Morning sunlight** - 10-30 minutes within an hour of waking
- **Cool, dark sleeping environment**
- **Wind-down routine** - Gentle activities before bed
- **Limit screens before bed** - Blue light disrupts sleep hormones
- **Power naps** - 10-20 minutes if needed, not longer

Sleep quality over quantity: 7-8 hours of quality sleep beats 9 hours of poor sleep.

Mindfulness & Stress Management

Why it works: Chronic stress depletes dopamine; managing stress preserves it and supports your OCD treatment.

What to try:

- **Deep breathing** – Like the 4-7-8 technique you've learned
- **Mindfulness meditation** - Even 5 minutes helps
- **Gratitude practice** - Write down 3 things you're grateful for daily
- **Nature time** - Being outdoors naturally reduces stress and you love it
- **Gentle stretching** or progressive muscle relaxation

Your Personal Dopamine Action Plan

This week, I will try:

- One new movement activity: _____
- One achievement/completion goal: _____
- One novel experience: _____
- One social connection activity: _____
- One nutrition improvement: _____

I notice my dopamine feels low when: _____

I notice my dopamine feels good when: _____

My biggest challenge with motivation during OCD treatment is: _____

💡 Remember

- **OCD treatment is hard work** - Your brain is learning new patterns, and that takes time and energy
- **Dopamine-seeking behaviours are normal** - Your brain is just trying to feel good while you're resisting compulsions
- **Small healthy actions add up** - You don't need to do everything at once, especially while doing intensive therapy
- **Your brain is adaptable** - These changes take time, but they work
- **You're not broken or weak** - Your brain is just adjusting to a new way of feeling good
- **Awareness is the first step** - Noticing patterns helps you make conscious choices
- **It's okay to ask for help** - Treatment is a team effort, and this transition is challenging for many people.
- **ERP work is creating positive change** - Even when it feels hard, you're literally rewiring your brain for the better.

You've already shown incredible strength by better managing your OCD and being over 7 years sober. Understanding this dopamine connection helps you make informed choices about feeling good while continuing that important therapeutic work.

This handout is for educational purposes and does not replace professional medical advice. Always consult with your healthcare provider about significant changes in mood, motivation, or mental health.

Janaya Karloci

NATUROPATH & DIRECTOR

📞 +61 415 575 788

✉️ wellness@janayakarlocinaturopath.com.au

🌐 www.janayakarlocinaturopath.com.au

📍 NSW, Australia



JANAYA KARLOCI
Naturopath