

INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY'S OCD CARE TEAM

Greetings Earthlings!

As summer approaches, many of us feel excited about more daylight and nicer weather. However, many of us may also feel an impending sense of doom around changes in routine, body image concerns that come along with summer clothing, fears of missing out and stress/urgency of over-packing our schedules with activities, or even just the constant awareness of the passage of time.

All of these issues could be addressed at length in their own articles and this particular newsletter edition will address comparisons that may arise while scrolling your socials this summer, as well as traveling while you have OCD. But, I'd like to briefly mention the stress and urgency we often feel to pack out schedules during the summer months, sometimes referred to as "sunshine guilt."

Sunshine guilt is that gnawing feeling you get when you feel like you need to make the most of the nice weather. It can lead to feelings of guilt, anxiety, regret, FOMO, and for some people even shame (i.e. they think they are "bad" or worthless for not being productive or "wasting" time).

Our capitalistic society is all about productivity. Not just at work, but in all areas. From the time we are children, we are told to not waste time, not sit around, otherwise we are deemed lazy. So, if you've felt this way, you're certainly not alone. In fact, I, myself, occasionally still struggle with fears around wasting time.

This fear of being lazy or wasting time creates a society where people equate their self-worth to how productive they are; their value is based on how much work they do, what they achieve, what they are doing. And social media just furthers this mentality because people are always posting what they are doing.



It's rare that you see content of people posting about a night at home or sleeping in. So, on top of the internalized societal values of productivity and not wasting time, when we see others doing all the things, it taps into our human need to be one with the pack, to fit in.

So, what can we do? First off, let's start with some self-compassion. Practicing self-compassion in this case looks like giving yourself permission to show up how you need to show up in life in that moment, to show up to work or that gathering at 25%, to not be doing all the things, or to not be living the most exciting and Instagram-worthy life. Self-compassion means doing all of this AND being non-judgmental of your choices and feelings.

Mindfulness and being intentional about that mindfulness is important. If we are constantly trying to fill our schedules and do the most, we really aren't being present. We are constantly thinking about the next activity or what else we want to do or where else we could be. Mindfulness allows us to drop into that moment and focus on one thing, one activity, one thought, one moment at a time. This might look like setting realistic expectations for oneself. Instead of thinking that every weekend needs to be packed with activities, try to check-in with yourself and gauge your energy and capacity. Maybe try picking 5 out of the 20 activities you want to participate in.

Regardless of your summer plans, remember to check in with yourself and be compassionate with where you are at with your energy and capacity. By practicing this, we will better be able to be present in the activities we do choose to participate in. And ultimately on a systemic level, remember that rest is resistance. I hope you find time to engage in your valued activities in mindful and intentional ways this summer and that this newsletter provides you with any nugget of support and help.

Sincerely,
Emily Hemendinger



OUR TEAM

- *Dr. Rachel Davis MD - Medical Director and Psychiatrist*
- *Emily Hemendinger LCSW, MPH, CPH, ACS – Clinical Director/Licensed Clinical Social Worker and DBS Coordinator*
- *Dr. Stephanie Lehto PsyD – OCD Therapist/Licensed Psychologist*
- *Dr. Jake Gadbaw MD - Psychiatrist*
- *Katie Sinsko MSW, SWC -- Social Work Fellow/IOP Therapist*
- *Orah Fireman, LCSW, MEd -- IOP Behavioral Health Specialist/Licensed Clinical Social Worker*
- *Erin LeBeau MSW --IOP Therapist/OP Therapist*
- *Cate Rush MSW --OCD Therapist/Social Work Fellow*
- *Jennifer Quigley PA-C --Prescriber, Physician Assistant*
- *Jake Winchester LPC --OCD Therapist*
- *Jennifer Fishman BS --IOP Care Coordinator/Behavioral Health Specialist*
- *Ambey Clark -- MSW candidate/Social Work Intern/OCD Therapist*
- *Kensie Funsch -- MSW candidate/Social Work Intern/OCD Therapist*
- *Otis Rush – Therapy dog extraordinaire*

Interested in contributing to the newsletter? Email the editor at Emily.Hemendinger@CUAnschutz.edu



STAFF SPOTLIGHT: JENNIFER QUIGLEY

Jenn Quigley completed her physician assistant training at Duke and has a passion for serving underserved and culturally diverse populations. She has worked in both outpatient and residential settings in psychiatry prior to joining the team at the OCD Program. In a past life, she worked as an au pair for a summer in Spain and had spent a few weeks selling fruit on the side of the road in New Zealand as part of a work exchange program. She enjoys breaking the stigma of mental health, especially for OCD, while meeting patients where they are in their journey and collaborating with her team to provide the best care. She is fascinated by the underwater world and the gentle giants that are whale sharks. Her senior chihuahua sometimes likes to join her for telehealth visits if he's not busy napping.

GROUP OFFERINGS

*Mondays at 4pm (monthly)
Intro to ERP - for new group members*

*Mondays at 6:30pm
For adults ages 18+ with OCD and related disorders*

*Tuesdays at 5pm
For adults ages 18+ with OCD and related disorders*

*Wednesdays at 6pm
For adults ages 18+ with OCD and related disorders*

*Thursdays at 4pm
For adults ages 18+ with OCD and related disorders*

We do have a waitlist for individual and group therapy, please reach out to be added to our waitlist and/or send you other referrals.

*Interested in IOP? Email
OCDIOP@cuanschutz.edu for more info!*

Are you a clinician who wants to know more about OCD and ERP? We offer trainings, consultations, and supervisions!

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE RESOURCES ON OCD AND ERP FOR CLINICIANS AND PATIENTS](#)

Fur-st Look with the OCD and Anxiety Program's Newest Team Member

Interview and questions by Emily Hemendinger | Content by Cate Rush and Otis Rush

I had the *oppawtunity* to sit down with one of our IOP therapists, Cate Rush, and Otis Rush, the OCD and Anxiety Program's therapy dog for some hard-hitting and *ruff* interview questions. Read on to learn about our newest team member.

Emily: Welcome Otis! You look quite fetching today. Let's start with the most important question first. Who's a good boy?

Otis: I am!!!

E: Yes you are! So tell us a little bit about yourself.

O: My name is Otis and I am a four year old Bernese Mountain Dog. I'm originally from Ohio but I moved to Colorado when I was pretty young. I used to live in Boulder, but I moved to Denver so my mom could go to graduate school at DU- I went with her to every class! I was trained as a therapy dog in September of 2024 and I'm so excited to start my new job.

E: How are you feeling about being our program's first therapy dog?

O: Like any job, I'm a little nervous for my first day but I know I'll get the hang of it and get used to my new routine. If I need a break, I can take one by going outside or resting in my office. It's normal to feel overwhelmed and a little anxious, especially when you're working as hard as I am.



It's really exciting that the OCD and Anxiety program is getting a therapy dog! I can't wait to work with patients and show them how helpful I can be.

E: What are you most looking forward to.

O: I'm looking forward to all the pets I'm going to get. And, I'm pretty sure I'm going to get a lot of treats.

E: How can a therapy dog help someone with OCD?

O: I can be helpful in so many ways. During exposures, I'm both calming and soothe and I can help patients practice self-compassion. When it's hard to practice self-compassion, patients can think about what I'd say I like the most about them.

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When people are having a hard time with sticky, obsessive thinking, they can focus on me. One thing I'm good at is giving direct feedback; if I don't like the way I'm being pet, I provide direct feedback by backing up or going next to my mom. Sometimes people with OCD struggle to provide direct feedback, and I can help them improve their communication style. And, I can demonstrate how rupture and repair works in a relationship. I don't hold grudges for too long, so I can show patients what repair looks like.

E: What about with other co-occurring disorders (e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorders, etc.)?

O: I can help people understanding and externalize their emotions in a healthy way by allowing them to coregulate with me. I'm also good at serving as an agent of de-arousal, and anyone can practice fostering relationships with me. A lot of people who I'm work with have personality disorders and attachment wounds, and I can show them what a secure object of attachment looks like. Additionally, when it's time for patients to say goodbye to me, I can teach them what closure and healthy goodbyes look like.

E: What's your favorite snack?

O: I might be the hungriest dog you've ever met, and I don't discriminate. But, my favorite food is probably bagels, or anything I find on the sidewalk where I live.

E: You deserve every morsel, Otis!

E: Ok last question for today: How do YOU take care of your mental health?

O: I love spending time in the mountains. My favorite activity is probably swimming, and I'll swim in any lake, stream, creek, or body of water I can find, no matter how small. I like to wind down by snuggling with my mom, putting my head on the pillow, and taking up the whole bed.

*E: Thank you so much Otis for taking the time to sit down with us today. I'm sure every at CU Anschutz will be **going mutts** over your presence on campus. We are all very **fur-tunate** to have you here.*



Social Media Woes

By Erin LeBeau

*“And I see everyone getting all the things I want. And I'm happy for them, but then again, I'm not.”
– Olivia Rodrigo*

Do you have the comparison blues now that summer is approaching?

Social media sites such as Instagram, X, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook are where we spend a majority of our time when we use our phones. There is an abundance of research that supports the idea that social media use leads to poor self-esteem, fear of missing out (FOMO), and depression. In fact, viewing content on health and fitness, other people’s social activities, and so called “motivational” posts are proven to have a negative effect on self-esteem and self-evaluation.

The concept of “upwards comparison” refers to evaluating oneself against others who are perceived as having greater skills, abilities, accomplishments, or status. While we may hope or believe this will increase our motivation, it frequently can lead to feelings of inadequacy or envy. “Downwards comparison” is when we compare to those that have less than us or less privileges, which comes with its own challenges as well. Nevertheless, we knowingly expose ourselves to various social media apps day after day.

As we turn the corner towards summer, I begin to anticipate the abundance of beach vacation carousel dumps, engagement photo shoots, and friend hang out stories. To add insult to injury, I also am imagining myself scrolling in my windowless office, my bed, or more realistically, the toilet.

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What steps can we take to reduce or eliminate the inevitable “doom scroll”?

1. Ask yourself, why do I continue to come back every day? What am I getting from this? What need is getting met by opening Instagram? (This is a Self-Enquiry skill from RO-DBT)
2. Turn off notifications for social media apps. (This enables us to develop more intentionality about when we choose to spend time with social media)
3. Use the ‘App Limits’ function to create a time limit for yourself for each app. (This will provide at least a momentary break to consider if you want to move on to doing something else)
4. Go cold turkey and delete the apps off your phone. (This might feel extreme but if you decide to try it, you might want to set a minimum amount of days to stick with it so you have time to adjust and retrain your brain)
5. Make ‘Shared Photo Albums’ with friends/family to mimic posting (Less pressure and more values-based!)
6. Lean into the uncertainty that maybe the person or people you are comparing yourself to have a better life than you or maybe they don’t. (Non-engagement responses from Exposure Response Prevention)
7. Download the Self-Compassion App and use it daily (self compassion app)

Be kind to yourself. Changing up habits is hard and may feel impossible at times. Scrolling is fun and there’s a reason we do it. Giving yourself compassion and grace when finding the strategy that fits your needs is imperative. If you are up for a challenge this summer, pick and choose from the list of elimination, replacement, and stimulus control response prevention strategies to see what works the best for you when it comes to interrupting compulsive scrolling.





Cats: Our Co-Conspirators in Care

By Ambey Clark, with additional reporting by Clementine and Yucca Clark

Is there anything more comforting than a soft, purring, 9-pound lump of cat sitting on your lap?

If you can't think of anything better, then welcome to the club of feline purrficionados!

As I type this, my cat (who lives with anxiety and OCD) just sighed loudly in his sleep with what I believe to be contentment. Cats can embody #goals of many therapeutic practices that we as humans can admire and adopt. Here are three examples of how cats can model well-being and mental health practices:

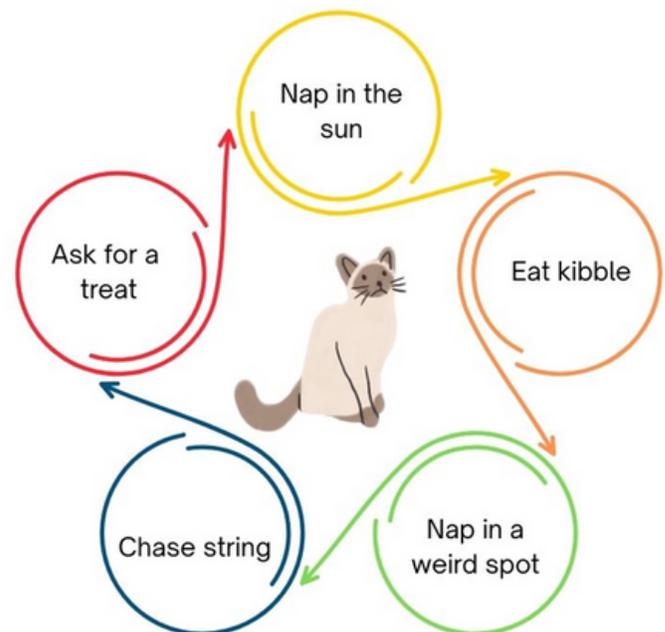
Practice self-care:

Unless you're a feral or working barn cat, a lot of cats resist hustle culture. Even when a cat's day is filled with watching squirrels, zooming across the house, and kneading all the soft blankets, they model self-care.

Self-care is the practice of intentionally taking time for pleasurable activities and practicing behaviors that overall help your health in the present and set-up your future self for wellbeing. Cats incorporate self-care into their routines and rarely stray from activities they need to keep themselves nourished, rested, socialized, and content.

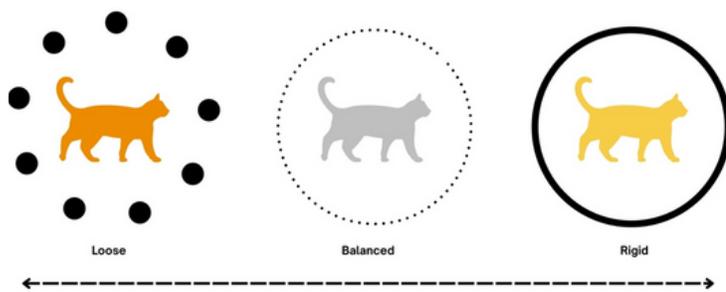
Set healthy boundaries:

Have you ever met a cat that doesn't like you? Do you immediately know when a cat



has no intention of seeking your approval? Chances are yes. Cats are often particular about who they will interact with and trust to protect themselves in their navigation of the world as small, vulnerable, and adorable animals.

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On the boundary spectrum, cats might exist somewhere between balanced and rigid. Thus, the slow process of earning trust and eliciting affection from a cat can be a good model to establishing boundaries. Engaging in that process can also be highly rewarding!

Express personal needs:

Most mornings I wake up at 2:00am to one cat sleeping on my leg and another cat pawing at me to be cuddled. Many evenings are filled with a cat standing directly in front of my computer screen. Throughout the day, one cat stands intimidatingly at his food bowl staring at me when I walk by.

Cats let you know in a variety of ways how they would like their needs to be met. They are experts at attuning to themselves and explicitly asking for what they would like. They also recognize and communicate when their needs have been met. When they are experiencing levels of pets, snuggles, and play that are too much for them, they simply walk away (Or bite your wrist if you didn't train them well - apologies to everyone who has ever visited my house!). Tell others what you need in your relationships and try not to assume they should know. Only pets can get away with staring and waiting for someone to read their mind!

This week, set an exposure goal to do one of these cat-approved activities! Or go out and practice mindfulness by observing cats and other animals for the many lessons to be learned from them. For myself, I plan to de-stress from school and work by spending time listening to the delightful purring sounds of my furry companions.



How to Survive the Summer When You're a Vampire

By Stephanie Lehto

I wish I was a vampire as that would provide me with an excellent reason for avoiding the sun. Did you know there is actually something called summer depression? Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD; or Major Depressive Disorder with Seasonal Pattern) is most associated with the fall or winter season and remits in the spring. Recurrent summer depression, with depression



starting in the spring and summer, is less common (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). For those of you who feel more depressed in the summer and feel alone (because most people are excited for the summer for some reason?), I'm here to tell you that you are not alone!

Some strategies to cope with your summertime sadness are:

1. Build awareness and recognize triggers (yes, this is always going to be my first step because without insight we are just sad and confused)
2. Feel your feelings (they're going to be there, might as well learn to accept them)
3. Make a routine and have some classic behavioral activation (do the things that you enjoy, even if that sounds really hard and maybe very dumb right now)
4. Work on your self-talk and practice self-compassion (listen, I get it, I don't want to be nice to myself either, but unfortunately that's actually helpful and important to do)

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5. Stay out of the sun and heat or wear protective clothing and sunscreen (I know we all want to get out and do things while it's "nice" out, but if it's too hot, the sun is too intense, or it's too humid, we actually do need to avoid being outside to help prevent fueling feelings of irritability/stress/sadness)



6. Drink water (just do it)

7. Sleep (preferably during nighttime hours)

8. Stop comparing and start being nice to yourself (this can include finances, activities that are completed, body comparison, etc. and yes, I basically said be self-compassionate twice, it really is that important!)



9. Talk to your support system (friends, family, treatment team)

10. .Call or text 988

It's probably going to be okay; we're going to make it through the summer months. In the wise words of Dean Winchester: "We make our own future."



Embrace the Journey

By Kensie Funsch

Summer vacations can come with a great deal of extra baggage for those living with OCD. Travel often brings disruptions to routines, unfamiliar surroundings, and shifting itineraries that may cause OCD symptoms to flare. OCD doesn't take a vacation when you do, which means it may be tagging along on your summer travel plans. Some might be feeling like going on vacation isn't worth the effort if their intrusive thoughts and compulsive urges will be hitching a ride, too. Yet, accepting the fact that OCD may be tagging along as an uninvited guest is the first step to having an enjoyable vacation. Once we recognize that OCD will be coming with us and stop fighting to control its presence, we can focus on the things that are within our control to manage symptoms and make the most of vacation time.

Here are some tips for traveling with OCD:

- Make a plan with your therapist! It's always important to reach out for support before travel. Your therapist can work with you to identify potential triggers, set reasonable exposure goals, and develop response prevention plans. Your therapist can also help you differentiate between what might be a reasonable measure to make this trip easier on yourself, versus what might be a compulsive urge to avoid travel-related anxiety.
- Plan exposures to work on before your trip that will help you prepare. Keeping up with regular ERP is essential to managing OCD. As your trip approaches, think about smaller-scale exposures you can complete beforehand that will target your travel-related fears. For example, if staying in a hotel will trigger fears of germs, you and your therapist may choose to work on contamination exposures before you go. This will give you a chance to practice response prevention tools and build confidence in your ability to tackle this trip.



- Resist urges to turn your trip into a nonstop exposure marathon. It might seem commendable to go all out and jam-pack your schedule to really put OCD in its place, but flooding yourself with exposures can leave you overwhelmed and unequipped to respond to the inevitable unplanned triggers that come with travel. Sticking to the manageable goals you have set with your therapist is one way to challenge your OCD without losing sight of the fact that vacation should be about enjoyment.
- Respect your own limits and give yourself permission to rest when you need it. Pushing yourself to keep up with other people when what you really need is rest won't make your trip more memorable—but it will exhaust you. Practice self-compassion by admitting when you need a break.
- Travel is hard on our bodies, so take steps to ensure you are taking care of yours. This includes doing your best to get enough sleep and eat regular meals, and packing an adequate supply of any medications you take.
- Connect to your values. You—not your OCD—planned this trip for a reason. When OCD tries to convince you to cancel, remind yourself why this vacation is important to you, the values you want to lean into, and the message you want to send to your OCD.
- And lastly, give yourself the credit you deserve for deciding to go on this trip—that's an exposure in itself. By working with your therapist to plan for OCD's presence on your trip, you are showing your OCD that it won't stop you from seeking out the experiences you value!



April Showers Bring May Flowers: Purpose in Emotional Regulation

By Jake Winchester

Being able to regulate emotions sounds like a great goal. However, when you're in the moment, it can feel beyond difficult to not react from a place of overwhelming emotion. So, I recommend taking some time to be in the present moment and making some small choices about next steps.

A helpful tool from DBT is the STOP acronym:

- **Stop:** Stop, freeze, whatever you're doing take a break and stay in control of your emotions for a short moment. Take a pause, take a moment, take a full stop.
- **Take a step back:** When you're in the moment and feeling overwhelmed, it can be hard to engage your thinking brain and instead be fueled by emotion. Take a moment for yourself to get unstuck from whatever emotion is coming up, take some deep breaths.
- **Observe:** Take account of what's going on around you and inside of you, what are people doing and saying, what are you thinking? (maybe some automatic negative thoughts are playing out?). Gather information to make an informed decision.
- **Proceed mindfully:** After gathering the information, ask yourself what you are wanting from this situation. Is it connection or understanding? What can help me get closer to those goals and how can I act towards those goals in a mindful way.

As with many skills, the STOP skill seems simple and straightforward, but it's not necessarily easy. Practicing this skill in moments when you aren't feeling reactive can allow you to have better access in those more intense emotional moments.

Remember to be kind and self-compassionate to yourself when you're using a new skill and allow for that skill to not be done perfectly.

Also remember that this skill relies on living out your values and making meaning from the moment, and any progress towards living out your values is good progress.



OCD PROGRAM UPDATES



This month, the team says goodbye to our social work interns, **Kensie Funsch and Ambey Clark**. They will be graduating from Metropolitan State University receiving their Masters in Social Work.



Ambey will be moving to Montana to begin her PhD in Clinical Psychology at the University of Montana. She plans on continuing to provide care for those with eating disorders and OC-spectrum disorders, while also focusing more on eating disorder research.

Kensie is planning to stay in Colorado and may even stick around the University (fingers crossed). Her eagerness to learn, strong group therapy skills, and empathy for both patients and co-workers will certainly be missed.



We welcomed **Jake Winchester, LPC** to the outpatient therapy team in January 2025. Jake is an active member of the IOCDF including their chronic illness SIG. Jake brings his expertise of OCD and OC-related disorders to the team, in addition to his friendliness and high level of consciousness and dedication.



In April 2025, we welcomed (back), **Jen Fishman, BS** to the IOP team as our care coordinator and behavioral health specialist. Jen was an intern with the team during the summer of 2024 while she completed the PURPLE program. She will be starting her MSW program at the University of Denver this fall and brings her passion, natural clinical insights, and willingness to learn to our team.

In July 2025, Emily Hemendinger, Dr. Rachel Davis, Dr. Stephanie Lehto, Erin LeBeau, and Cate Rush will be presenting at the International OCD Foundation's annual in-person conference in Chicago, Illinois. Let us know if we will see you there! Schedule follows:

- **Adulting 102: Getting Focused**
 - Friday July 11th at 8am CST
 - Emily Hemendinger, Rachel Davis, Erin LeBeau, and Stephanie Lehto
- **The complex intersection of eating disorders and OCD: An ED OCD SIG panel discussion and Q&A**
 - July 12th at 8am CST
 - Stephanie Lehto and other members of the ED OCD SIG
- **OCD and Pets: The Pawsitives and Ruff Stuff**
 - Sunday July 13th at 8am CST
 - Emily Hemendinger, Rachel Davis, Stephanie Lehto, Cate Rush, and Otis Rush



In August 2025, we will also welcome two new social work interns, **Rachel Lehnert and Abby Osterlund**. They will be joining our team from the University of Denver.

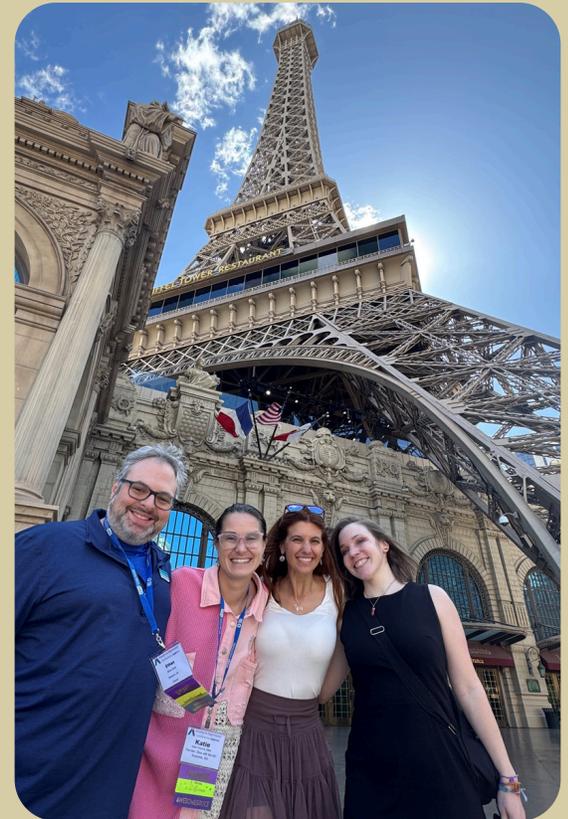
In September 2025, the team will host our first psychology extern, **Jeremy Lawrence** from University of Colorado Boulder Campus. Welcome to you all!

HELLO!

OCD PROGRAM Happenings



In April, Stephanie (left) and Emily (right) presented at the Anxiety and Depression Association of America's annual conference in Las Vegas. Their presentation focused on using cognitive flexibility as a treatment target in eating disorders, OCD, autism, and those who experience perfectionism.



Above: Conferences can be great opportunities to connect with amazing people and professional peers. Emily and Stephanie got to meet up with Ethan Smith and Rev. Katie O'Dunne.



The IOP team celebrated spring and nice weather with a field day. Top row left to right: Erin, Katie, Orah, Cate, Kensie, Ambey Bottom row left to right: Emily, Oris, and Jen. Missing: Dr. Jake

Below: Otis enjoying the IOP field day at the end of April. Field day including lots of fun, exposure-coded and values-based games and activities.





OCD WALK



Proceeds benefit
International
OCD Foundation
OCD Colorado

Marquee sponsor



DENVER

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2025
10:00AM-12:00PM
BELLEVIEW PARK -
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