

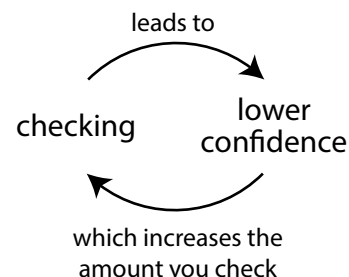
Checking, Certainty, And Doubt

Checking is a common compulsion (behavior) in obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Checking is related to doubt. Doubt and uncertainty feel unpleasant, so we check to remove the unpleasant feeling.

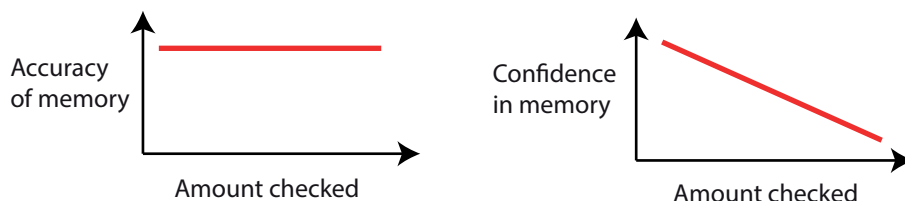
Our compulsions (behaviors) are driven by our obsessions (thoughts). For example, one person has an obsessive fear of burning the house down and will then spend a lot of time checking to make sure the electrical sockets are switched off. Another person fears that they have forgotten doing something terrible, like injuring another person, and will repeatedly check their memory to confirm whether this is so. Checking can take up a huge amount of time and in severe cases it can be disabling.

Something is wrong though: if the checking were really effective, why should it need to be carried out so many times?

Researchers have found that repeated checking is self-perpetuating: the more you check, the less certain you are about the result, and the more you feel the need to check.



Repeated checking doesn't affect how *accurate* your memory is, but it does affect your *confidence* in your memory.



As an analogy, can you remember what you had for breakfast today? Last week? Last year? The more breakfasts you have, the more difficult it is to remember an individual breakfast. The same is true of checking: the more times you check, the harder it is to remember a specific time you have checked and what the result was – you just have a vague general impression that you have checked and aren't sure what the result was when you did so.

If you have an issue with checking and certainty you can investigate this for yourself using the behavioral experiment below. To get the most from it make sure to complete all parts in full:

Write down something you worry about and check a lot:

Day 1: Whatever worry you wrote above, check it for 30 minutes.
For example, if you worry about light switches being turned off then check the switch for 30 minutes

Now walk away and wait for 5 minutes

Q: How confident are you that the thing you checked is 'safe'?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely confident

Q: How strong is your urge to go and check it?

No urge at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very strong urge

Day 2: Whatever you wrote above, check it just once.

For example, if you worry about light switches being turned off then check the switch just once.

Now walk away and wait for 5 minutes

Q: How confident are you that the thing you checked is 'safe'?

Not at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Completely confident

Q: How strong is your urge to go and check it?

No urge at all 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very strong urge

What have you learned?