

Facts

Anxiety disorders are the most common emotional disorder, affecting more than 20 million, about one in nine, Americans annually. Anxiety disorders include Panic Disorder, Phobias, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

While times of nervousness can function as a call-to-action, for the person with anxiety disorders, the symptoms often come for no apparent reason and do not go away. If left untreated, anxiety disorders can be so debilitating as to propel people to go to great lengths to avoid the source of their dread. People with anxiety disorders usually find that their personal relationships, job performance and quality of life suffer as a result of their anxiety.

Effective treatments for anxiety disorders are available.

Signs & Symptoms

PANIC DISORDER

The main symptom of panic disorder is the panic attack. During a panic attack, the person may experience an overwhelming fear of being in danger, or believe he/she is having a heart attack. Other symptoms include:

- Pounding heart or chest pain
- Shaking, trembling, or sweating
- Shortness of breath or feeling of choking
- Nausea or abdominal pain
- Dizziness, light-headedness, numbness
- Feeling unreal or disconnected
- Fear of losing control, “going crazy” or dying
- Chills or hot flashes.

PHOBIAS

A phobia is an uncontrollable, irrational and persistent fear of a specific object, situation, or activity. The fear experienced by people with phobias can be so great that some individuals go to extreme measures to avoid things that trigger their anxiety.

There are at least three types of phobias: Specific phobia (which is an extreme or excessive fear of an object or situation that isn't harmful under general conditions), Social phobia (marked by significant fear of being embarrassed or scorned in social/performance situations), and Agoraphobia (in which the fear of experiencing a

panic attack is so severe that individuals typically seek to avoid certain situations altogether).

Phobias are diagnosed only when the specific fear is excessively upsetting or substantially interferes with normal daily living.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

Obsessive-Compulsive disorder, also called the “doubting disease,” is characterized by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. The obsessions, or persistent thoughts, can cause overwhelming anxiety which can be relieved only by performing certain acts, or compulsions. Compulsive behaviors can sometimes take up more than an hour a day, becoming extremely disruptive to a person's life.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Post-traumatic stress disorder can occur in people who have survived a severe or terrifying physical or emotional trauma, such as violent personal attack, physical or sexual abuse during childhood, witnessing serious injury of another person, tragedies, natural disasters, or military combat. Individuals keep experiencing the event through nightmares and flashbacks, and feel extreme mental and physical distress when exposed to situations that remind them of the ordeal. Symptoms include feeling numb or detached, jittery or on guard, depressed, or having trouble sleeping.

GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

Individuals with generalized anxiety disorder feel ongoing, excessive tension that interferes with their daily life. People may worry constantly about their health, family, work or money, even when there seems to be no reason to do so. Those with generalized anxiety disorder are unable to relax, are easily tired and irritable, have difficulty concentrating and may experience insomnia, muscle tension, trembling, fatigue and headaches.

Causes

Anxiety disorders run in families. Brain chemistry appears to play a role in the onset of anxiety disorders, as symptoms are often relieved by medications that alter levels of chemicals in the brain. Personality also may play a role, as people who have low self-esteem and poor coping skills are more likely to have anxiety disorders. Finally, long-term exposure to abuse, violence or poverty

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may affect people's susceptibility to anxiety disorders.

Treatment

The most commonly used treatments are medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of the two. Although not cures, both treatments are effective in relieving the symptoms of anxiety disorders, helping people to live healthier lives.

Several effective **medications** are available. Medications often require several weeks to achieve their full effect, so progress should be monitored by a psychiatrist to determine whether a change is needed in either the type or the amount of medication given. There are more medications available than ever before to treat anxiety disorders. So if one drug is not successful, there are usually others to try. Most of the medications prescribed to treat anxiety disorders start the person on a low dose and gradually increase it to the full dose. Every medication has side effects, but these usually diminish with time or are tolerable.

Psychotherapy has been used to address the symptoms of anxiety disorders, successfully teaching people to react differently to the situations and bodily sensations that trigger panic attacks and other anxiety symptoms. **Behavioral therapy** focuses on changing specific actions and uses several techniques to decrease or stop unwanted behavior. (For example, a technique called **exposure therapy** gradually exposes the person to what frightens him and helps him cope with his fears.) **Cognitive-behavioral therapy** helps people learn how their thinking patterns contribute to their symptoms and how to change their thoughts so that symptoms are less likely to occur.

Helping Yourself

A number of strategies have been proven to help calm the body and mind. Here are a few things to try:

- **Breathing.** Consciously take several deep breaths, concentrating on each breath.
- **Relaxation** by body parts. Close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and consciously relax yourself, one body part at a time, beginning at your toes and working up until you have relaxed your entire body, including head and face. An alternative is to tense each body part for 15-20 seconds before relaxing it.
- **Imagine** a pleasant peaceful scene or favorite place. Concentrate on the details, colors, smells and sounds.
- **Massage.** Self-massage of face, neck and head is easy to do and is an instant stress reducer.
- **Meditation,** yoga, and listening to soothing music are all proven stress-reducing activities.
- **Hot baths, warm showers, steam baths and saunas** are all common and easy methods of relaxation.
- **Exercise** is known to increase the body's morphine-like endorphins, while improving the brain's oxygen supply and releasing tension from the muscles.
- Find a way to **express your feelings** either by joining a support group, starting a diary or journal, talking things over with a friend, or doing something else that allows

you to express yourself.

- **Monitor your outlook.** Looking at your troubles as temporary rather than permanent, and specific rather than universal, is optimistic and stress-reducing. For example, instead of thinking, "I'm a bad person," try, "I have a bad habit." Try to focus on immediate issues rather than on global ones. When the "big picture" seems overwhelming, break down big tasks into smaller, manageable ones.

Helping Someone Else

If a friend or family member has an anxiety disorder it is important to be patient and accepting, yet not to regard the affected person as permanently disabled. While the person should be allowed to set his own pace for recovery, you can be supportive by encouraging the person to seek treatment. Then be supportive of his or her medication regime and therapy and educate yourself about the particular disorder your friend or family member is suffering from. Self-help books are often a good source of information. You might also seek the help of a trained family therapist and/or join an educational support group.

Examples of supportive things to say are: "I'm proud of you. Tell me what you need now. Breathe slow and low. Stay in the present. It's your thoughts that are bothering you, not the situation. I know that what you are feeling is painful, but it's not dangerous. You can do it no matter how you feel."

Sources:

*American Psychiatric Association
National Institute of Mental Health*

For more information contact

Northern Lakes Community Mental Health
1-800-492-5742
(231) 922-4850

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org
(800) 950-6264

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
(800) 421-4211 (depression info)
(888) 826-9438 (anxiety info)
(301) 443-4513 (other info)

Mental Health America
www.nmha.org
(800) 969-6642

The Center for Mental Health Services
www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/