

ANXIETY

What is anxiety?

Everyone experiences anxiety now and again. Challenging situations naturally trigger fight-or-flight responses, such as rapid heartbeat, sweaty hands, cool extremities, and increased alertness. However, anxiety disorders cause more intense emotional and psychological discomfort. Sufferers feel helpless, and instead of coping and resolving tension naturally, they feel overwhelmed and think the worst possible things will happen. Anxiety is the largest mental health problem in the US.

What are the symptoms of anxiety disorder?

Physical:

- Headaches or muscle tension
- Fatigue, trouble sleeping
- Upset stomach
- High blood pressure
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath

Emotional:

- Frustration
- Depression, feelings of emptiness, low self-esteem
- Irritability
- Edginess

Behavioral:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Racing thoughts or obsessions
- Biting fingernails and scratching
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol (unfortunately this may increase frequency and severity of panic attacks)

- Accident-prone
- Avoiding situations associated with panic attacks, leading to an increasingly restricted life

Relationship:

- Feelings of bitterness
- Nagging
- Conflict
- Avoidance

What causes anxiety disorder?

Anxiety disorder is frequently triggered by a sudden crisis or troubling event. Otherwise, the disorder may be caused by a more permanent aspect of life, such as:

- Stress, especially long-term.
- Pressure you place on yourself to reach personal goals.
- Changes at home, school, or in your family.
- Genetics or biological predisposition. People who have relatives with an anxiety disorder are more likely to develop an anxiety disorder themselves. Studies suggest that some who suffer may have a chemical imbalance in the brain, causing the fight-or-flight response to be out of order.
- Personality traits. Certain qualities, such as low self-esteem and poor coping skills contribute to the development of anxiety problems.
- Long-term abuse, violence, or poverty.
- Drug use. Some people experience panic attacks after using caffeine or marijuana. Drastically reducing caffeine intake can have the same effect.

What's the difference between everyday nerves and anxiety disorder?

Everyone experiences a little anxiety in stressful situations, like a first date, class presentation, or job interview. Such nerve-racking situations can cause sweaty palms, butterflies in the stomach, rapid heartbeat, and blushing. However, there is good reason for this nervousness which passes without serious physical or psychological consequences. Anxiety disorder, on the other hand, is a medical disorder that strikes without warning and can hinder daily activities. People who suffer anxiety disorder feel inexplicably overwhelmed by fear and physical distress. Efforts to reduce these symptoms often disrupt daily routines, and personal and business relationships.

What are the different types of anxiety disorders?

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder: chronic, exaggerated worry and tension that is unfounded or much more severe than the normal anxiety most people experience. People with GAD constantly worry about all sorts of things and usually expect the worst.
- Panic Disorder: frequent panic attacks characterized by a flood of physical and emotional sensations of fright, without apparent cause. You're likely to suffer rapid heartbeat, chest pain, trouble breathing, and fear of going crazy or dying. Sensations can be so real you feel like you're having a heart attack or some other medical emergency.
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: recurring irrational thoughts that cannot be controlled through reasoning. To make these unwanted thoughts go away, people with OCD engage in repetitive behavior, such as washing hands or counting. These actions can take up significant amounts of time and energy, disrupting daily life.
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: occurs in individuals who have survived extremely taxing and disturbing situations, such as warfare or abuse. They suffer recurrent memories of their ordeals through nightmares and flashbacks. When reminded of their traumas, patients experience extreme psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety. Other symptoms include a sense of numbness and detachment from the world.
- Phobias: uncontrollable and irrational fears of certain objects, situations, or activities. Examples include fear of snakes, water, spiders, heights, or social events. These phobias can greatly restrict life as patients go to extreme lengths to avoid the situations that cause them fear.

How is anxiety treated?

- Psychotherapy: along with medication, psychotherapy is the most common and effective treatment for anxiety disorder. Therapists provide clients an opportunity to talk about uncomfortable feelings, stay in touch with emotions, and learn how to reduce anxiety. By investigating the cause of anxiety, a client is better able to overcome his/her disorder.
- Medication: Depending on the severity of the anxiety, medication is used in combination with psychotherapy. Drugs can offer effective, yet short-term relief from anxiety. The prescription depends on the type of anxiety.
- Self-help: Most effective when accompanied by therapy, self-help techniques enable individuals to cope with anxiety problems through relaxing activities. Therapists will often suggest clients take up art, keep a journal, breathe deeply to relax, exercise regularly, or practice yoga.

What should I do if I have a panic attack?

- Remember you are not in danger.
- Change your breathing patterns. You are probably breathing shallowly and fast, so slow down by taking long, deep breaths to get more oxygen in your blood.
- Relax all your muscles. A good technique to accomplish this involves starting with the feet, tensing the muscles there and relaxing them, doing the same for each muscle all the way up to the face.
- Imagine a peaceful setting, such as the beach or park.
- Give yourself a simple task, like counting backwards from 100 by 3's, to give your mind something else to focus on until the attack subsides.

Will anxiety disorders get worse if left untreated?

Unfortunately, yes. People who suffer from anxiety disorders often begin to fear panic attacks themselves, resulting in agoraphobia. Agoraphobics avoid situations they believe trigger panic attacks and from which escape would be difficult or embarrassing. This leads to an increasingly restricted life. For example, a person may refuse to go grocery shopping because she had a panic attack in the supermarket. Without treatment patients may enter a vicious cycle of increasing fear.

If you would like to talk about any of these issues, call the Counseling Center at (336) 316-2163.
