
Anxiety Disorders

The cultural stigma associated with mental illnesses often prevents a person from seeking treatment. Mental illnesses are not just disorders of the mind, but disorders of the physical brain; similar to other physical health disorders such as heart or lung disease. Mental illnesses, like physical health problems, are highly treatable and manageable when they are properly diagnosed.

In the U.S., the most common mental illness affecting both children and adults is Anxiety Disorders. Statistics show that more women than men have anxiety disorders. People with anxiety disorders are constantly filled with fears and worries for no apparent reason. These feelings can last for months and interfere with daily activities, productivity, and relationships. Anxiety disorders are often accompanied by depression, eating disorders, and drug and alcohol abuse. These conditions require separate treatment.

Causes of Anxiety Disorders

The exact cause is unknown at this time, but it may be due to a combination of biological, genetic, and environmental factors. Stress, long-term exposure to abuse, violence, or poverty as well as personality or disposition (e.g. low self esteem) may play a role in altering brain chemistry, causing the development of this illness.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Phobias

A phobia is an excessive, intense and persistent fear of a specific object, situation, or activity, which is generally not considered to be dangerous or harmful. A person may go to extreme lengths to avoid what he/she fears. Some examples are fear of dogs, flying, driving, heights, elevators, crowded places, socializing, and meeting people.

Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

ASD and PTSD occur in people who have survived a traumatic event such as war, sexual abuse, car accidents, plane crashes, floods, or earthquakes. People with ASD and PTSD have recurrent nightmares, flashbacks (reliving the trauma over and over again in their thoughts), and difficulty sleeping. They become emotionally detached, irritable, and are easily frightened. These symptoms usually begin within days after the incident but can appear years later.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

People with GAD are chronic worriers. They worry excessively about health, family, job, or money on a daily basis. They always expect the worst to happen. Persons suffering from GAD have trouble sleeping, muscle aches, upset stomachs, and difficulty concentrating.

Panic Disorder

Individuals with panic disorder can have a sudden attack of terror and intense fear (panic attack) for no reason, often accompanied by rapid heart beat, sweating, chest pain, dizziness, and shortness of breath. These symptoms may be mistaken for a heart attack or stroke. A person experiencing a panic attack may also feel that he/she is losing control, going crazy, or dying.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

People with OCD have persistent preoccupation with repeated thoughts or obsessions and use routines to control the anxiety that the obsessions produce. Common obsessions include preoccupation with germs, excessive doubts, difficulty throwing things away, having things arranged in a particular order, and storing unneeded items. Examples of compulsive behaviors are repeated hand washing, constant checking and rechecking, and following a rigid routine.

Diagnosis of Anxiety Disorders

Your primary care doctor can determine if the symptoms that you are experiencing are due to an anxiety disorder, other medical conditions, or both. Once an anxiety disorder is diagnosed, you may be referred to see a mental health professional – a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, counselor, or social worker.

Treatments for Anxiety Disorders

An individualized treatment plan may include the use of medications, psychotherapy, or a combination of both. The addition of support groups, aerobic exercise, stress management, meditation, family support, and the avoidance of caffeine and alcohol can make treatment even more effective.

1. Medications

Medications help to keep anxiety disorders under control but will not cure the illness. It is important to continue taking the medications in order for them to be effective. Your doctor or psychiatrist will adjust the dosage according to how well the medications relieve your symptoms without causing too many unwanted side effects. Commonly prescribed medications include antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, and beta-blockers. Sedatives (benzodiazepines) that minimize the attack's effect in 30 – 90 minutes are also available, though long-term usage may result in memory loss.

2. Psychotherapy

The primary goal of psychotherapy is to better understand and deal with the illness at hand by talking with a mental health professional. The two most effective forms are:

Behavioral Therapy

Through relaxation or deep breathing exercises and gradual exposure to situations or objects that trigger anxiety, a person can learn to control and change his/her response to what he/she fears.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

By understanding and changing thinking patterns, a person can change the way he/she reacts to circumstances that cause anxiety.

People with anxiety disorders can lead normal, productive lives if they seek help and adhere to the recommended treatment programs. If you or someone you know is experiencing any of the symptoms described above, please discuss them with your family doctor or contact the following agencies for assistance:

**Asian Family Institute of
Richmond Area Multi-Services Inc. (RAMS)**
415.668.5998 ext 101
www.ramsinc.org

San Francisco Mental Health Access
415.255.3737
www.sfdph.org/menthlth/consumerguide.htm

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
301.443.5158
www.nimh.nih.gov

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Revised 1/2010