



Anxiety & Anxiety Disorders

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a common human reaction with which most of us are familiar. The beating heart, sweaty palms and the need to rush urgently to the toilet. What is going on? Our bodies are preparing to protect us with the most basic of human and animal instincts- survival. The commonly termed “fight or flight” response is when the body’s survival mechanisms kick in when faced with danger. The physical symptoms we feel have a purpose – getting us ready for action. The heart is beating madly to send more blood to the muscles, which tense, ready for movement. The breathing speeds up to make more oxygen available for the body and sweating cools the active body down.

The danger we feel when confronted with a job interview or get ‘stage fright’ is more of a threat to our sense of self than a physical threat, but our body only knows one way to respond to threat- the “fight or flight” response. The feeling of anxiety is hard to tolerate, and along with the bodily symptoms comes an overwhelming urge to escape or stop whatever is causing us to feel anxious. As we know, anxiety feelings occur along a spectrum –sometimes we may feel a little bit anxious or nervous while other occasions may make us feel overwhelmed and panicky.

WHAT IS AN ANXIETY DISORDER?

In addition to our normal feelings of anxiety when feeling under threat in any way, there are a number of very specific types of anxiety disorder which can occur. The anxiety experienced with these disorders is definitely up the high end of the spectrum and can seriously affect a person’s well being. The main difference between an anxiety disorder and normal anxiety or stress is the degree of irrational worry about the problem and the related avoidance of situations or activities.

Anxiety disorders can profoundly affect a person’s social and personal relationships and interfere with her or his ability to cope well with work or school. Activities and opportunities are severely curtailed.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Many of the anxiety disorders start at an early age – either during childhood or adolescence. Although some anxiety is common and normal in children, it is usually temporary.

Abnormally high or ongoing anxiety at this time may be expressed as excessive clinginess to parents, refusal to go to school or isolation. Most highly anxious children do not “grow out of it” without help and usually grow up as anxious adults. Early treatment can therefore be very beneficial not only to support the child but also to prevent problems becoming entrenched into adulthood.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Anxiety disorders are fairly common, with around 11-14% of the population experiencing these problems. There is no specific cause responsible for the development of an anxiety disorder. Rather, a number of things can make a person more susceptible to developing an anxiety disorder, such as:

- Family history of anxiety
- Stress
- Trauma
- A traumatic childhood
- An overprotected childhood
- Personality factors
- Excessive drug use (cannabis, amphetamines, ecstasy, alcohol)

WHAT ARE THE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

The following are brief descriptions of the anxiety disorders:

Panic Disorder:

A panic attack is an extreme experience of the ‘fight or flight’ response. The physical sensations of the panic attack can be very frightening, leading to an intense fear of

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having another attack. Often the fear leads to avoidance of the place or situation where the panic attack occurred, thus severely limiting the activities of the person.

Social phobia:

Social phobia is characterised by an excessive fear and anxiety that other people are thinking negatively and judgementally about the person. This leads to avoidance of any situation where the person might be the centre of attention, even if only briefly.

Generalised anxiety disorder:

The person experiences a consistently high level of anxiety, characterised by excessive worry.

Post traumatic stress disorder:

Following a traumatic experience, the person continues to be distressed by the incident even some time after the event. Vivid memories, nightmares and hallucinations are common.

Obsessive compulsive disorder:

The person with OCD is plagued by recurring thoughts which are often about the fear of contamination or that the person is likely to cause harm to others. In order to allay these fears and anxieties, the person engages in behaviours which are ritualistic and repetitive, such as hand washing, checking or hoarding.

Specific phobias:

Excessive anxiety and fear about a particular thing such as flying, dogs, blood etc. can impact on a person's ability to fully participate in life.

ADDITIONAL ISSUES

The response to the extreme degree of anxiety can cause additional problems for the person experiencing an anxiety disorder, such as avoiding people or places; not being able to continue working; or using alcohol or drugs to minimise the anxiety or to give "Dutch courage". Depression is common for people experiencing an anxiety disorder.

HELP FOR ANXIETY DISORDERS

Counselling

The use of a specific counselling technique called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is recommended for anxiety disorders and has a high success rate.

Medication

The antidepressant medications can effectively reduce the symptoms of anxiety. Tranquillisers (benzodiazepines) can be useful in reducing the symptoms of anxiety in the early stages but are not recommended for longer than one or two weeks due to the risk of dependency on these drugs.

Information and Self help

There are a number of good books and websites available providing information about anxiety disorders and strategies based on CBT principles. Books by Bev Aisbett and Bronwyn Fox are very popular. Support groups can be useful in conjunction with treatment.

Meditation

Meditation practice can help with reducing anxiety and calming the mind.