

Anxiety Information

Anxiety disorders are the most common of all the mental disorders. They affect an estimated 8 to 10 of every 100 children and adolescents.

Everybody knows what it's like to feel anxious — the butterflies in your stomach before a first date, the tension you feel when your boss is angry, the way your heart pounds if you're in danger. Anxiety rouses you to action. It gears you up to face a threatening situation. It makes you study harder for that exam, and keeps you on your toes when you're making a speech. In general, it helps you cope.

Anxiety disorders, however, are illnesses that cause people to feel frightened, distressed and uneasy for no apparent reason. Young people with anxiety disorders experience excessive fear, worry, or uneasiness that interferes with their daily lives.

Anxiety disorders aren't just a case of "nerves." They are illnesses, often related to the biological makeup and life experiences of the individual, and they frequently run in families. Left untreated, these disorders can dramatically reduce productivity and significantly diminish an individual's quality of life.

There are several types of anxiety disorders, each with its own distinct features.

Anxiety disorders include:

***Phobia** - Two major types of phobias are *social phobia* and *specific phobia*. People with social phobia have an overwhelming and disabling fear of scrutiny, embarrassment, or humiliation in social situations, which leads to avoidance of many potentially pleasurable and meaningful activities. People with specific phobia experience extreme, disabling, and irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger; the fear leads to avoidance of objects or situations and can cause people to limit their lives unnecessarily.

***Generalized anxiety disorder** - Constant, exaggerated worrisome thoughts and tension about everyday routine life events and activities, lasting at least six months. Almost always anticipating the worst even though there is little reason to expect it; accompanied by physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headache, or nausea.

***Panic disorder** - Repeated episodes of intense fear that strike often and without warning. Physical symptoms include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal distress, feelings of unreality, and fear of dying.

***Obsessive-compulsive disorder** - Repeated, unwanted thoughts or compulsive behaviors (such as counting or hand-washing) that seem impossible to stop or control.

***Post-traumatic stress disorder** - A pattern of flashbacks and other symptoms that occurs in children who have experienced a psychologically distressing event such as physical or sexual abuse, being a victim or witness of violence, or exposure to some other traumatic event such as a bombing or hurricane.

It is common for an anxiety disorder to accompany another anxiety disorder, or in some cases depression, eating disorders or substance abuse. Anxiety disorders can also co-exist with illnesses such as heart disease, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, thyroid conditions, and migraine headaches. In such instances, these disorders will also need to be treated. Before undergoing any treatment, it is important to have a thorough medical exam to rule out other possible causes.

Many people with anxiety disorders can be helped with treatment.

Many people misunderstand anxiety disorders and other mental illnesses and think individuals should be able to overcome the symptoms by sheer willpower. Wishing the symptoms away does not work.

Therapy for anxiety disorders often involves medication or specific forms of psychotherapy.

Medications, although not cures, can be effective at relieving anxiety symptoms. Today, 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. In addition, new medications to treat anxiety symptoms are under development.

For most of the medications that are prescribed to treat anxiety disorders, the doctor usually starts the patient on a low dose and gradually increases it to the full dose. Every medication has side effects, but they usually become tolerated or diminish with time. If side effects become a problem, the doctor may advise the patient to stop taking the medication and to wait a week — or longer for certain drugs — before trying another one. When treatment is near an end, the doctor will taper the dosage gradually.

Behavioral therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy can be effective for treating several of the anxiety disorders.

Behavioral therapy focuses on changing specific actions and uses several techniques to decrease or stop unwanted behavior. For example, one technique trains patients in diaphragmatic breathing, a special breathing exercise involving slow, deep breaths to reduce anxiety. This is necessary because people who are anxious often hyperventilate, taking rapid shallow breaths that can trigger rapid heartbeat, lightheadedness, and other symptoms. Another technique — exposure therapy — gradually exposes patients to what frightens them and helps them cope with their fears.

Like behavioral therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches patients to react differently to the situations and bodily sensations that trigger panic attacks and other anxiety symptoms. However, patients also learn to understand how their thinking patterns contribute to their symptoms and how to change their thoughts so that symptoms are less likely to occur. This awareness of thinking patterns is combined with exposure and other behavioral techniques to help people confront their feared situations. For example, someone who becomes lightheaded during a panic attack and fears he is going to die can be helped with the following approach used in cognitive-behavioral therapy. The therapist asks him to spin in a circle until he becomes dizzy. When he becomes alarmed and starts thinking, "I'm going to die," he learns to replace that thought with a more appropriate one, such as "It's just a little dizziness — I can handle it."