

Anxiety Disorders

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Anxiety disorders are a serious medical illness, which can fill people's lives with overwhelming anxiety and fear.

Anxiety is a strong feeling of fear and may involve constant worry. Intense anxiety is a temporary reaction to the stresses of everyday life.

Some anxiety is normal and even necessary. It can help to prepare your body for the fight-or-flight response, which is your body's natural way of coping with being frightened or challenged. Your instincts take over and tell you that you are facing danger and you either need to defend yourself (fight) or get away (flight).

You need to get help when you have physical symptoms that keep you from feeling healthy and affect your work or social life. Severe and chronic (long-lasting) anxiety needs treatment.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is more than normal, everyday anxiety. It is long-term, exaggerated worry and stress that interferes with work or social activity. This makes your everyday tasks more difficult.

You may constantly worry about all sorts of things and expect the worst. You may be unable to relax or you may have trouble sleeping.

Other signs and symptoms of GAD are:

- muscle tension
- irritability
- tiredness
- trouble concentrating
- problems sleeping.

Panic Disorder

If you suffer from panic disorder, you suddenly feel terrified without warning. These situations are called panic attacks. You cannot predict them. They can happen at any time and in any place ("out of the blue").

During a panic attack you may have:

- shortness of breath or fast heartbeat
- shaking, trembling
- nausea (upset stomach), abdominal pain
- sweating, weakness, dizziness
- a feeling like you are "going crazy."

You may live in fear of another attack. Panic attacks can limit your life by making you avoid places where you have had one in the past.

Phobias

A phobia is a fear of an object, activity or situation that is so intense that you avoid the cause of that fear. Common fears are:

- animals or insects
- heights
- enclosed spaces
- flying.

If you have a social phobia, you may worry about embarrassing yourself in front of others. You may believe other people are watching you, waiting for you to make a mistake.

You may have a hard time talking to other people at work or at school. You may be nervous about a meeting or speech for weeks.

Obsessive-compulsive Disorder

If you have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), you worry and have repeated thoughts, urges or images that may be upsetting. These are called obsessions. Examples are:

- fear of germs
- fear of being hurt
- fear of hurting others.

You may also do actions over and over to make disturbing thoughts go away or to make yourself feel safe. Such actions are called compulsions. Examples are:

- repeated counting
- repeated cleaning (including repeated handwashing)
- repeated checking on something such as if the front door is locked
- hoarding or stockpiling.

You may know what you're doing doesn't make sense, but you can't stop. These thoughts or actions can become so time consuming that you are unable to live a normal life.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

You may get post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being in or seeing a scary or terrible event such as:

- a rape
- sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- a violent crime
- a car or airplane crash
- a weather disaster such as a tornado
- a fire
- a war
- an event where you thought you might have been killed.

PTSD may cause reoccurring images of the event, flashbacks, nightmares and intense distress when you are in or around anything that reminds you of the event.

You may have problems sleeping, and you may not be able to care about or trust others. You may always be looking for danger. You may become upset when something unexpected happens. Anniversaries of the event are often difficult.

Treatment

Anxiety disorders can be treated. Medicine, talk therapy and integrative therapies (relaxation techniques, deep breathing exercises) can help reduce your symptoms.

Talk with your health care provider about how you can get help.