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Guide to Anxiety

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Anxiety

Anxiety is the other main type of mental illnesses seen. About 1 in 20 people have an anxiety disorder at any one time and about 50% of these will also have depression as well.

Anxiety is a normal feeling that we all experience when faced with difficult or threatening situations. It makes us more alert and responsive and helps us to avoid danger, however if our feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, it can be overwhelming and interfere with our life affecting our work, relationships and general day to day activities.

Anxiety is deemed abnormal if it:

- Is out of proportion to the stressful situation; or
- Persists when a stressful situation has gone, or the stress is minor; or
- Appears for no apparent reason when there is no stressful situation.

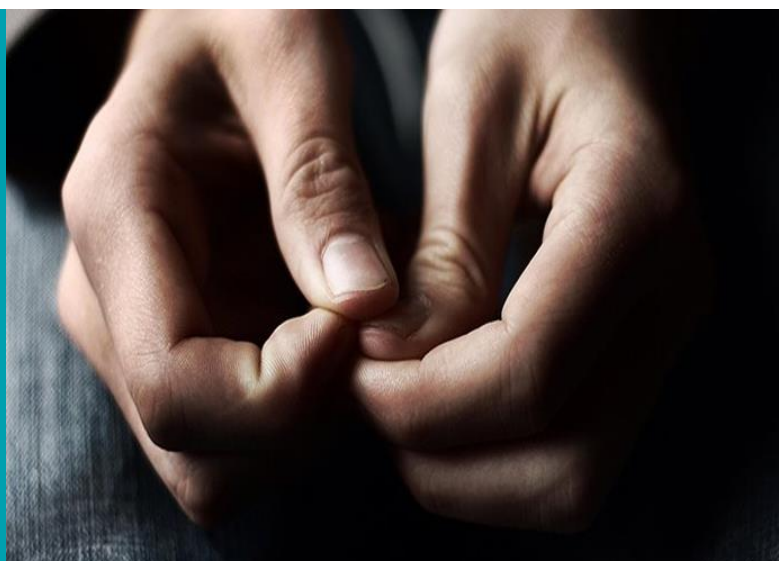
Anxiety can result in the development of both physical as well as psychological and behavioural effects very similar to those seen when the body feels under stress or pressure because of the release of the same hormones – adrenaline.

Physical	Psychological	Behavioural
Palpitations	Unrealistic fear	Avoidance of situations
Sweating	Excessive fear and worry	Withdrawal
Shaking	Mind racing	Repetitive behaviour
Rapid breathing	Mind going blank	Compulsive behaviour
Shortness of breath	Irritability	
Dizziness	Impatience	
Nausea and vomiting	Anger	
Dry mouth	Disturbed sleep	
Muscle aches and pains	Vivid dreams	

There are several disorders where anxiety is the main symptom.

The main types of anxiety disorders include:

- Generalised anxiety disorder
- Panic disorder
- Phobias
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Reaction disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder



Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterised by persistent and excessive worry about several different things. People with GAD may anticipate disaster and may be overly concerned about money, health, family, work, or other issues. Individuals with GAD find it difficult to control their worry.

They may worry more than seems warranted about actual events or may expect the worst even when there is no apparent reason for concern. Sometimes just the thought of getting through the day produces anxiety.

People with GAD don't know how to stop the worry cycle and feel it is beyond their control, even though they usually realise that their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants.

Panic disorder is diagnosed in people who experience spontaneous seemingly out-of-the-blue panic attacks and are very preoccupied with the fear of a recurring attack. This is regarded as the most severe form of anxiety.

Panic attacks occur unexpectedly, sometimes even when waking you up from sleep. It may resemble a heart attack or asthma attack with the person thinking that they may be dying.

Attacks are brought on by triggers which vary between people but commonly is the result of being in specific situations, places or doing specific activities.

Phobic anxiety disorders or phobias are numerous!

A **phobia** is strong fear or dread of a thing or event where the fear is out of proportion to the reality of the situation. Coming near to or into contact with the feared situation causes anxiety. Sometimes even thinking of the feared situation causes anxiety. Therefore, you end up avoiding the feared situation, which can restrict your life and may cause distress.

Social anxiety disorder (also known as social phobia) is possibly the most common phobia. With social anxiety disorder you become very anxious about what other people may think of you, or how they may judge you. Therefore, you fear meeting people, or 'performing' in front of other people, especially strangers. You fear that you will act in an embarrassing way and that other people will think that you are stupid, inadequate, weak, foolish, crazy, etc. You avoid such situations as much as possible. If you go to the feared situation you become very anxious and distressed.

Agoraphobia is another well-known phobia and is common too. Many people think that agoraphobia means a fear of public places and open spaces. But this is just part of it. If you have agoraphobia you tend to have several fears of various places and situations. So, for example, you may have a fear of:

- Entering shops, crowds and public places.
- Travelling in trains, buses, or planes.
- Being on a bridge or in a lift.
- Being in a cinema, restaurant, etc., where there is no easy exit.

But they all stem from one underlying fear. That is, a fear of being in a place where help will not be available, or where you feel it may be difficult to escape to a safe place (usually to your home). When you are in a feared place you become very anxious and distressed and have an intense desire to get out. To avoid this anxiety many people with agoraphobia stay inside their home for most or all the time.

There are many other phobias of a specific thing or situation including:

- Fear of confined spaces or of being trapped (claustrophobia).
- Fear of spiders, mice
- Fear of needles and injections.
- Fear of being alone.

But there are many more.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is an anxiety disorder which has 2 parts – obsessive thoughts which are unwelcome, and which results in intense feelings of anxiety and compulsive behaviours to reduce the feelings of anxiety.

Obsessions are recurrent unwanted thoughts, images or ideas that come into the mind that can cause great distress. **Compulsions** are the repetitive behaviours that are done to reduce the feelings of anxiety. A good example is frequently washing hands due to a fear of infection from germs. These behaviours are self-reinforcing and can seriously restrict the person's life.

There are three main types of **reaction disorders**:

- **Acute stress reaction** which occurs typically suddenly due to an unexpected life crisis and usually settles quickly. It sometimes even occurs before the event takes place when it is known as situational anxiety.
- **Adjustment reaction** which is like the acute stress reaction but usually develops days or weeks after a stressful situation such as a divorce or house move, as a reaction or adjustment to the problem. The symptoms experienced are like the acute stress reaction but may also include depression. It usually improves over a few weeks, and,
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** – this is probably the most well-known of the reaction disorders. It can follow a severe trauma such as a serious assault or a life-threatening accident or after witnessing such an event. The main symptoms of PTSD are recurrent flashbacks about the trauma, avoidance of anything that can trigger thoughts of the trauma, emotional numbness, pessimism about the future, being constantly on alert and an increased state of irritability, poor sleep and difficulty concentrating.

Treatment for anxiety

Anxiety can be successfully managed and treated. The main aim of anxiety treatment is to help reduce the symptoms so that anxiety no longer affects day-to-day life.

The treatment options depend on the anxiety disorder, and how severely you are affected. They may include both medication and non-medication treatments.

Non-medication treatments include:

- Understanding the cause of symptoms and talking things over with a friend, family member or health professional may help. Some people worry that the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a 'thumping heart' (palpitations), are due to a physical illness. This can make anxiety worse. Understanding that you have an anxiety disorder often helps in reducing the distress the symptoms can bring.
- Counselling may help some people with certain conditions. For example, counselling which focuses on problem-solving skills may help if you have GAD.
- Anxiety management courses may be an option for some conditions. The courses may include: learning how to relax, problem-solving skills, coping strategies and group support.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can work well for persisting anxiety disorders and phobias:
- Self-help. There are various national groups which can help by giving information, advice and support. They, or your health professional, may also be able to put you in touch with a local group for face-to-face support. You can also get leaflets, books, CDs, DVDs, MP3s, etc., on relaxation and combating stress. They teach simple deep-breathing techniques and other measures to relieve stress, help you to relax and possibly ease anxiety symptoms.

There are 4 main types of medication used for managing anxiety. They are antidepressant medication, benzodiazepines, buspirone and beta blockers.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are the group of antidepressants commonly used for anxiety disorders. SSRIs often used for anxiety are:

- Escitalopram, and
- Sertraline

These are also commonly used to treat depression but also help to reduce the symptoms of anxiety even if you are not depressed. They work by interfering with brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) such as serotonin which may be involved in causing anxiety symptoms. Antidepressants are not tranquillisers and are not usually addictive.

Benzodiazepines on the other hand are. Benzodiazepines such as diazepam used to be the most commonly prescribed anxiety treatment. They were known as the minor tranquillisers, but they do have some serious known side-effects. They often work well to ease symptoms.

The problem is they are addictive and can lose their effect if you take them for more than a few weeks. They may also make you drowsy. Now they are not used much for persistent anxiety conditions.

A short course of up to two weeks may be an option for anxiety which is very severe and short-term, or now and then to help you over a bad spell if you have persistent anxiety symptoms.

Buspirone

Buspirone is sometimes prescribed to treat GAD. It is an anti-anxiety medicine but different to the benzodiazepines and is not thought to be addictive. It is not clear how it works, though it is thought to affect serotonin, a brain chemical which may be involved in causing anxiety symptoms.

Beta-blocker medicines

A beta-blocker - for example, propranolol - can ease some of the physical symptoms such as trembling and a 'thumping heart' (palpitations). Beta-blocker medicines do not directly affect the mental symptoms such as worry. However, some people relax more easily if their physical symptoms are eased.

These tend to work best in short-lived (acute) anxiety. For example, if you become more anxious before performing in a concert then a beta-blocker may help to ease 'the shakes'.

In some cases, a combination of anxiety treatments such as cognitive therapy and an antidepressant may work better than either treatment alone.

A word of caution though - alcohol may ease symptoms in the short term, don't be fooled thinking that drinking helps to cure social anxiety. In the long run, it does not. Drinking alcohol to 'calm nerves' can lead to problem drinking and may make problems with social anxiety and depression worse in the long term.