

What You Need to Know...



What is Anxiety?

We all know 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, and the way your heart pounds if you're in danger.

Anxiety can prepare you to face a threatening situation, and may even help you cope with stress. However, if you have an anxiety disorder, this normally helpful feeling can disrupt your life. Anxiety disorders aren't just a case of the nerves, they're illnesses.

How Common are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in America, and they often run in families. They affect more than 19 million people each year. In recent years, they have cost the U.S. \$46.6 billion annually due to absenteeism, job loss, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Phobias

Phobias, which affect 5.3 million people each year, are the most common type of anxiety disorder. Phobias aren't just extreme fears; they're irrational fears. Although the cause for phobias is not clear, they do tend to run in families and occur more frequently in women. Depression and alcoholism may accompany phobias.

A specific phobia is a fear of a particular object or situation, such as dogs. A social phobia is a fear of being embarrassed in a social setting. The most common social phobia is a fear of public speaking. This disorder is not the same as shyness. Shy people can be very uneasy around others, but they don't feel extremely anxious about a social situation.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) affects about 5.2 million people each year. This condition, which follows a terrifying event, was once referred to as shell shock or battle fatigue.

The event that triggers PTSD may be something that threatened the person's life, such as a violent attack, a natural disaster, or a serious accident. It also may be something witnessed, such as a plane crash or an act of terrorism.

Some people with PTSD repeatedly relive the trauma in the form of nightmares and disturbing daytime recollections. Other symptoms may include sleep problems, feeling detached or numb, being easily startled, or avoiding situations or places that might bring back memories. Not every traumatized person gets PTSD. The condition is diagnosed only if symptoms last more than a month.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), a chronic, exaggerated worry and tension, affects about 4 million Americans and is usually accompanied by another anxiety disorder, depression or substance abuse. GAD is much more than the normal anxiety people experience everyday. People with this disorder often worry excessively about health, money, family or work.

People with GAD can't seem to shake their concerns, even when they know their worries are more intense than the situation warrants. Their anxiety is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as trembling,

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nausea, sweating or fatigue. People with GAD seem unable to relax, and they may startle more easily than other people. GAD most often strikes people in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood as well.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which affects about 3.3 million persons, is characterized by anxious thoughts and rituals. Persons obsessed with germs may wash their hands repeatedly. Those filled with doubt, such as whether or not they locked a door, will check things over and over.

The disturbing thoughts are called obsessions, and the rituals performed to alleviate the anxiety are called compulsions. This disorder is diagnosed when rituals consume at least an hour a day, are very distressing, and interfere with daily life.

Panic Disorder

Panic Disorder affects about 2.4 million people, causing feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly without warning. People with panic disorder can't predict when they will have an attack, and many develop intense anxiety about when and where the next one will strike.

The person having a panic attack will most likely have a pounding heart, tingling or numb hands, feel sweaty, weak, faint, or dizzy and either flushed or chilled. They may have chest pain, a sense of unreality, or fear of disaster. They may genuinely believe they are having a heart attack or stroke. Attacks can occur any time, even while sleeping.

Some people's lives become so restricted they avoid normal activities, such as grocery shopping, driving, or even leaving the house - avoiding any situation they fear would make them feel helpless if a panic attack occurred. When people's lives become restricted to this extent, which happens in about one-third of all people with panic disorder, the condition is called agoraphobia.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety, also called social phobia, is a disorder characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social situations. People with social anxiety have a persistent, intense and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and of being embarrassed or humiliated by their own actions. Their fear may be so severe that it interferes with work or school and other ordinary activities. While many people with social anxiety recognize that their fear of being around people may be excessive or unreasonable, they are unable to overcome it. They often worry for days or weeks in advance of a dreaded situation.

Getting Help for Anxiety Disorders

A visit to your family doctor is usually the best place to start. A physician can help you determine if your symptoms are due to an anxiety disorder, some other medical condition, or both. Often, the next step is a referral to a mental health professional.

Psychiatrists generally treat anxiety disorders with a combination of psychotherapy and medication. Most anxiety disorders respond well to treatment.

Source: adapted from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) pamphlet, Anxiety Disorders.

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