

**Anxiety disorders** are a group of mental illnesses that cause people to feel excessively frightened, distressed, or uneasy during situations in which most other people would not experience these same feelings. When they are not treated, anxiety disorders can be severely impairing and can negatively affect a person's personal relationships or ability to work or study. In the most severe cases, anxiety disorders can make even regular and daily activities such as shopping, cooking or going outside incredibly difficult. Anxiety disorders can further cause low self-esteem, lead to substance abuse, and isolation from one's friends and family.

Most common anxiety disorders:

**Panic Disorder**—Characterized by “panic attacks,” panic disorder results in sudden feelings of terror that can strike repeatedly and sometimes without warning. Physical symptoms of a panic attack include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, upset stomach, feelings of being disconnected and fear of dying. Some people with this disorder may experience unrealistic worry of having more panic attacks and become very ashamed and self-consciousness. This can result in some people feeling too afraid to go to certain places (e.g., airplanes, elevator) which can be very intrusive in their daily lives.

**Obsessive-compulsive Disorder (OCD)**—OCD is characterized by repetitive, intrusive, irrational and unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or rituals that seem impossible to control (compulsions). Some people with OCD have specific compulsions (e.g., counting, arranging, cleaning) that they “must perform” multiple times each day in order to momentarily release their anxiety that something bad might happen to themselves or to someone they love. People with OCD may be aware that their symptoms don't make sense and are excessive, but on another level they may fear that the thoughts have are having might be true.

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**—When people experience or witness a traumatic event such as abuse, a natural disaster, or extreme violence, it is normal to be distressed and to feel “on edge” for some time after this experience. Some people who experience traumatic events have severe symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, being very easily startled or scared, or feeling numb/angry/irritable/distracted. Sometimes these symptoms last for weeks or even months after the event and are so severe that they make it difficult for a person to work, have loving relationships, or “return to normal.” This is when a person may be suffering from PTSD. Many people with PTSD have difficulty discussing their symptoms because they may be too embarrassed or scared to recall their trauma. This is common in victims of sexual abuse and in combat veterans.

**Phobias**—A phobia is a disabling and irrational fear of something that really poses little or no actual danger for most people. This fear can be very disabling when it leads to avoidance of objects or situations that may cause extreme feelings of terror, dread and panic. “Specific” phobias center on particular objects (e.g., caterpillars, dogs) or situations (e.g., being on a bridge, flying in an airplane). Many people are very sensitive to being criticized and are ashamed of their phobias which can lead to problems with self-esteem.

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**—A severe, chronic, exaggerated worrying about everyday events is the most common symptom in people with GAD. This is a worrying that lasts for at least six months, makes it difficult to concentrate and to carry out routine activities, and

happens for many hours each day in some people. Some people with this disorder anticipate the worst and often experience physical symptoms of fatigue, tension, headaches and nausea due to the severity of their anxiety.

**Social Anxiety Disorder**—An intense fear of social situations that leads to difficulties with personal relationships and at the workplace or in school is most common in people with social anxiety disorder. People with social anxiety disorder often have an irrational fear of being humiliated in public for “saying something stupid,” or “not knowing what to say.” People with this illness may have symptoms similar to “panic attacks” (e.g., heart palpitations, dizziness, shortness of breath) or may experience severe sweating (hyperhidrosis) when in social situations. This leads to avoidance of social situations which can make it difficult to go to parties, school, or even family gatherings.

Other recognized anxiety disorders include: agoraphobia, acute stress disorder, anxiety disorder due to medical conditions, such as thyroid abnormalities, and substance-induced anxiety disorder, such as from too much caffeine.

Some people with other mental illnesses, such as depression or schizophrenia, may have symptoms of severe anxiety. These symptoms of worrying, panic attacks or compulsions may make treating their primary illness more complicated for mental health professionals. Therefore, complete treatment of depression or schizophrenia often requires treatment of anxiety symptoms.

People with anxiety disorders are more likely to use or abuse alcohol and other drugs including benzodiazepines (e.g., diazepam, alprazolam and clonazepam), opiates (e.g., pain-killers, heroin) or cigarettes. This is known as self-medication. Some people use drugs and alcohol to try and reduce their anxiety. This is very dangerous because even though some drugs make people feel less anxious when they are high, anxiety becomes even worse when the drugs wear off. Other people are anxious because they are intoxicated or withdrawing from drugs and alcohol.

### Causes

Although studies suggest that people are more likely to have an anxiety disorder if their parents have anxiety disorders, it has not been shown whether biology or environment plays the greater role in the development of these disorders. Some anxiety disorders have a very clear genetic link (e.g., OCD) that is being studied by scientists to help discover new treatments to target specific parts of the brain.

Some anxiety disorders can also be caused by medical illnesses. Scientists at the National Institute of Mental Health and elsewhere have discovered a link between some cases of OCD that occur following infection or exposure to a certain bacteria. This connection is described by the term Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders (PANDAS). Other anxiety disorders can be caused by brain injury. Scientists have also found that certain areas of the brain, including a part of the brain called the amygdala, work differently in people with anxiety disorders.

The sudden appearance of severe anxiety symptoms in a person of any age requires immediate attention by both caregivers and doctors. Parents and friends should be aware that a traumatic

event may be causing their loved one to become more nervous or to have other symptoms of anxiety disorders. Doctors should be aware that many medical problems including hormonal and neurological illnesses can cause symptoms of anxiety.

### **Manifestations**

Remember that under different circumstances, the following symptoms can affect any individual for a short period of time. It is only when they are prolonged, severe and disruptive to your life, that you may need to consider if you have an anxiety disorder. In greater or lesser degrees, and depending on the disorder, symptoms include:

- Racing pulse, heart palpitations, possibly even chest pain
- Shortness of breath, panting, dry mouth
- Blushing
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Trembling, shaking, muscle tension
- Dizziness
- Hot flashes and sweating, or chills
- Difficulties with sleep
- Inability to concentrate

### **Treatment**

If you suspect that you or someone you care about has an anxiety disorder, the first thing you should do is talk to your family doctor. Have a complete physical examination to make sure there are no underlying ailments such as anemia or a thyroid problem mimicking the signs of an anxiety disorder.

If your family doctor feels you have an anxiety disorder, s/he will discuss treatment options. Two main types of treatment are often prescribed:

#### **1. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

One-on-one CBT, or in small group is very effective in helping with anxiety disorders. During the cognitive portion of the sessions, a therapist assists individuals in identifying their anxiety-producing thoughts and then in evaluating their validity. When focusing on the behavioural portion of therapy, individuals are challenged in small, manageable steps, to face the situations that provoke their anxiety, and through gradual exposure, learn to control their fears. Depending on the disorder, CBT may be prescribed as the only treatment approach.

#### **2. Medication**

Due to the biological factors contributing to anxiety, prescribed medications targeted at the brain's chemical messengers can also be helpful. These include classes of drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRI) and benzodiazepines.

#### **Lifestyle Choices**

Let's not forget about the things you can do on your own. You need to be an active member of your mental health team. Take a proactive role in your well-being and make lifestyle choices that are mindful and healthy.

Do:

- Join a support group if your community has one: It is important for you to network with others who are also asking questions about their illness and looking for coping strategies to help them with their disorder;
- Eat a healthy diet: A well-balanced, nutritious diet is important for overall health;
- Avoid alcohol, caffeinated beverages and illegal drugs: While it is tempting to seek emotional relief from substances, they often increase your anxiety and can trigger panic attacks;
- Stop smoking: Try to cut down or even quit smoking. As you cultivate a healthy body, you will feel great about getting rid of this habit;
- Exercise: Get active and stay active. Physical activity has been proven to improve mood and a sense of calm;
- Stress management: Find a course on stress management and seek ways to reduce your stressors and your perception of them;
- Try meditation and other activities that calm the mind: Sitting or moving meditations such as tai chi and yoga are beneficial to calming the mind;
- Get a good night's sleep: You need sufficient sleep to help you feel good the next day, so be sure to get enough rest at night;
- Share your feelings: Nurture your relationships just as they in turn nurture you. Empower your own capacity to heal by making lifestyle choices that work for your mental health. A healthy body helps a healthy mind.

## Sample Conversation

**Person:** I am an anxious person. The anxiety that I feel is strong. It's tough. It has a hold over my life.

**Therapist:** A hold over your life? Like it has you trapped?

**Person:** Yes, it's keeping me prisoner. It keeps me trapped in a very dark place.

**Therapist:** What is Anxiety keeping you prisoner from?

**Person:** Well I used to love going shopping, but the anxiety makes me dread going out where there might be lots of people. Parties as well. I'd like to make more friends but when I go out I just get so anxious.

**Therapist:** So Anxiety traps you away from the things you enjoy, shopping, parties, meeting people and things like that?

**Person:** Yes. It takes away my pleasure.

**Therapist:** Would it be fair to say Anxiety robs you of pleasure? Or would that be the wrong expression?

**Person:** No, that's fair. It has robbed me of pleasure. It gives me insomnia so it's also robbed me of sleep. It's been around a long time.

**Therapist:** What does this Anxiety stop other people from knowing about you?

**Person:** It makes me seem unfriendly and people get the idea that I don't like making friends. Nothing could be further from the truth! In fact if it wasn't for Anxiety I think I might have a lot more friends.

**Therapist:** Really?

**Person:** Yes. I'm actually a nice person. But the Anxiety keeps this hidden.

**Therapist:** What strategies does Anxiety use to try to keep this niceness hidden?

**Person:** It talks me out of doing things. I might have every intention of going out to a family get-together but Anxiety tells me it will be too hard and I start to panic.

**Therapist:** Have there been times when you have stood up to Anxiety and refused to listen to it?

**Person:** Yes there have, although there are not many.

**Therapist:** Can you tell me about one of these times? What did you do?

**Person:** It was during my best friend's wedding. She invited me and asked me to be her maid of honor. I refused at first, because the thought of having to walk in the aisle, with all eyes on me, stir up anxious thoughts. But then, she pleaded. She told me it would make her wedding day complete to have me there...plus the fact that we haven't seen each other for more than 10 years, made me commit to being there.

**Therapist:** That was indeed a courageous, selfless and great deed on your part. Thank you for sharing this important information today. Hope to talk to you soon.