

Anxiety Disorders

Everyone knows what it's like to feel anxious – we get butterflies in our stomach before a first date, we feel tension during an argument, we feel fear when startled.

Anxiety is a normal emotion that rouses us to action. But for someone diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, this normally helpful emotion can disrupt daily life. There are several types of anxiety disorders, each with its own set of symptoms.

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Panic Disorder

People with panic disorder have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly. These experiences are called “panic attacks.” Because these attacks are unpredictable, many sufferers develop intense anxiety between episodes, worrying when and where the next attack will strike.

Those who suffer panic attacks say the experience is like having a heart attack or stroke. Chest pains, a tingling or numb feeling in the hands, feeling flushed, chilled, weak, dizzy or smothered are all characteristic of an attack. Attacks can occur any time, even during sleep.

While most attacks average a few minutes, they can last as long as ten minutes and, in rare cases, for an hour or longer. Panic disorder is twice as common in women as in men. It can appear at any age, but most often it begins in young adults.

Panic disorder can lead to a condition called “agoraphobia,” which is anxiety over being in places or situations where panic attacks have occurred or from which escape might be difficult if an attack occurred.

Early treatment of panic disorder can often stop the progression of agoraphobia.



Phobias

There are three types of phobias. A specific phobia is an irrational fear of a particular thing or situation, such as spiders, closed-in spaces, heights or flying. Social phobia is a fear of being embarrassed in a social setting. Agoraphobia often accompanies panic disorder. Phobias aren't just extreme fear, they are irrational fear. Adults with phobias realize their fears are irrational, but often facing, or even thinking about facing, the feared object or situation brings on severe anxiety.

No one knows what causes phobias, though they seem to run in families. Phobias usually first appear in adolescence or adulthood and start suddenly. When children have specific phobias, for example a fear of animals, these fears usually disappear over time.

If the object of fear is easy to avoid, people with phobias may not feel the need to seek treatment. For some individuals, though, their fear is so intense that they make major career or personal decisions to avoid a phobic situation.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder

To have an obsession is to be plagued by unwelcome thoughts or images. Compulsions are rituals some people engage in repeatedly to dispel their obsessions.

While we all experience obsessions and compulsions to some degree, people who are diagnosed as having obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) experience their obsessions and compulsions to such a degree that their daily activities are hindered. For example, an OCD sufferer obsessed with germs or dirt may wash his or her hands over and over. Another may be filled with such doubt that he or she checks and re-checks things repeatedly.

Most adults with this condition recognize that the rituals they perform are meaningless, but they can't stop it.

Children diagnosed with OCD may not realize that their behavior is out of the ordinary.

OCD strikes men and women in about equal numbers and afflicts roughly one in 50 people. It can appear at any time, but it usually first shows up in the teens or early adulthood. The course of the disease is variable. Symptoms may come and go, they may ease with time, or they can grow progressively worse.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) occurs among some people who've experienced or witnessed a terrifying event.

People with PTSD have persistent, frightening thoughts about their ordeal. The disorder was first brought to public attention by war veterans. Any number of traumatic incidents, car or train wrecks, floods or earthquakes, violent attacks such as a mugging or rape, can lead to PTSD.

Some PTSD sufferers repeatedly relive the trauma in the form of nightmares and disturbing memories. They may have trouble sleeping, feel detached or numb, or be "jumpy." They may lose interest in things they once enjoyed. They may feel irritable, aggressive, even violent. Anniversaries of the event are often very difficult.

PTSD can occur at any age, and symptoms may be mild or severe. In severe cases, sufferers may have trouble working or socializing.

Not every traumatized person experiences PTSD. PTSD is diagnosed only if the symptoms last more than a month. In those who have PTSD, symptoms usually begin within three months of the trauma. Occasionally, the illness doesn't show up until years after the traumatic event.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

People who have generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) experience chronic, exaggerated worry and tension, even though nothing seems to provoke it. Having this disorder means always anticipating disaster, or worrying excessively about health, money, family or work.

GAD is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as trembling, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, sweating or hot flashes. The GAD sufferer may feel lightheaded or out of breath, feel nauseated or as though he or she has a lump in the throat. Many individuals with GAD startle more easily than others. They tend to feel tired and have trouble concentrating and relaxing. They often have trouble falling or staying asleep.

Most GAD sufferers don't avoid certain situations as a result of their disorder. However, if severe, GAD can be debilitating, making it difficult to carry out even the most ordinary daily activities.



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Symptoms of an Anxiety Disorder

The various anxiety disorders share many common symptoms.

Among them:

- Shakiness, trembling
- Muscle aches
- Sweating
- Cold/clammy hands
- Dizziness
- Jitteriness
- Tension
- Fatigue
- Racing or pounding heart
- Dry mouth

- Numbness/tingling of the hands, feet or other body parts
- Upset stomach
- Diarrhea
- Lump in the throat
- High pulse or breathing rate

Getting Help

Help is available for anyone experiencing any of the anxiety disorders mentioned in this article. Among the health care professionals who can help are psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, many of whom specialize in treating anxiety disorders. Some anxiety sufferers attend self-help support groups. Others may benefit from medications, while still others do best with a combination of these therapies.

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