

Let's talk about...

Anxiety Disorders

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

ANXIETY IS A COMMON EXPERIENCE AND SOMETHING THAT EVERYONE ENCOUNTERS TO SOME DEGREE AS THEY FACE THEIR FEARS AND LIFE'S CHALLENGES AND STRESSES. HOWEVER, ONE IN TEN PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY ANXIETY DISORDERS TO SUCH A DEGREE THAT THEY EXPERIENCE INTENSE, PROLONGED FEELINGS OF FRIGHT AND DISTRESS FOR NO APPARENT REASON. ANXIETY DISORDERS ARE MORE PREVALENT AMONG WOMEN THAN AMONG MEN, AND THEY AFFECT CHILDREN AS WELL AS ADULTS. FORTUNATELY THEY ARE ILLNESSES THAT CAN BE DIAGNOSED AND TREATED.

Anxiety disorders affect our behaviours, thoughts, emotions, and physical health. It is believed they are caused by a combination of biological facts and individual personal circumstances, much like other health problems such as heart disease or diabetes. People can suffer from more than one anxiety disorder, and it can co-exist with depression, eating disorders, or substance abuse, as well as other physical disorders. Anxiety disorders can range from mild to severe. They include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder.** Characterized by non-specific and excessive worries about almost anything, all the time.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder.** Associated with repetitive, uncontrollable, and irrational thoughts that usually involve themes of harm, danger, or contamination (e.g. fear of leaving a stove on or becoming contaminated from touching doorknobs). [See separate fact sheet.]
- **Panic disorder** with or without agoraphobia. Panic is an unexpected “burst” of excessive anxiety, usually interpreted as a signal that something is terribly wrong. Panic can lead to agoraphobia (fear of public places where escape is difficult and help is hard to obtain).

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder.** Affects individuals who have survived a severe physical or mental trauma, or have witnessed such an event (e.g. abuse, assault, robbery, accident or natural disasters). [See separate fact sheet.]

- **Social phobia.** An exaggerated fear of social situations in which one's behaviour can be scrutinized and evaluated by others. It is far more severe than shyness and can lead to isolation and severely impaired social relationships.

- **Specific phobia.** Encompassing any number of possible fears, phobias are heightened and irrational fears of objects or situations that poses no real threat.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Consider seeking help if:

- Your muscles are tense or ache.
- You feel nervous, “keyed up” or irritable.
- You are physically agitated (heart palpitations, rapid breathing, sweating, stomach upset, numbness or “pins and needles” in you arms, hands, or legs).
- You worry all the time to the point that it interferes with attention and concentration.
- You aren't sleeping well.
- You have vague pains, headaches, or dizziness.

TREATMENT

Anxiety disorders are the most treatable of all mental health disorders. Treatment can involve medication, counselling, or a combination of both. Medication can reduce symptoms fairly quickly, but psychological therapies may have more lasting treatment effects. A large component of counselling therapy is generally educational: learning the source of the anxiety, recognizing that symptoms are not a sign of ill-health, and realizing how avoidance of fearful situations prolongs anxiety.

Anxiety, even when treated, can be something you might have to contend with for many years. The good news is that if you plan ahead for this possibility you can prevent setbacks and/or reduce the anxiety that much faster. Make sure your healthcare provider has specialized knowledge and skill treating anxiety disorders and that there is a plan to maintain change.



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