

Everyone feels anxious at times. Challenges such as workplace pressures, public speaking, highly demanding schedules or writing an exam can lead to a sense of worry, even fear. These sensations, however uncomfortable, are different from the ones associated with an anxiety disorder. People suffering from an anxiety disorder are subject to intense, prolonged feelings of fright and distress for no obvious reason. The condition turns their life into a continuous journey of unease and fear and can interfere with their relationships with family, friends and colleagues.

Anxiety disorders are the most common of all mental health problems. It is estimated that they affect approximately 1 in 10 people. They are more prevalent among women than among men, and they affect children as well as adults. Anxiety disorders are illnesses. They can be diagnosed; they can be treated.

But all too often, they are mistaken for mental weakness or instability, and the resulting social stigma can discourage people with anxiety disorders from seeking help.

Understanding the facts about anxiety disorders is an important step. Realising that they are medical disorders which can be treated will help to remove the stigma, and encourage people with anxiety disorders to explore the treatments available.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Anxiety disorders are a group of disorders which affect behaviour, thoughts, emotions and physical health. Research into their origins continues, but it is believed they are caused by a combination of biological factors and an individual's personal circumstances, much like other health problems, such as heart disease or diabetes.

It is common for people to suffer from more than one anxiety disorder; and for an anxiety disorder to be accompanied by depression, eating disorders or substance abuse. Anxiety disorders can also coexist with physical disorders, in which case the physical condition should also be treated.

Some of the signs to look for are:

Panic Disorder – As the name suggests, panic disorder is expressed in panic attacks which occur without warning, accompanied by sudden feelings of terror. Physically, an attack may cause chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal discomfort, feelings of unreality and fear of dying. When a person avoids situations that he or she fears may cause a panic attack, his or her condition is described as panic disorder with agoraphobia.

Phobias – Phobias are divided into two categories: social phobia, which involves fear of social situations, and specific phobias, such as fear of flying, blood and heights.

Social Phobia – People with social phobia feel a paralysing, irrational self-consciousness about social situations. They have an intense fear of being observed or of doing something horribly wrong in front of other people. The feelings are so extreme that people with social phobia tend to avoid objects or situations that might stimulate that fear, which dramatically reduces their ability to lead a normal life.

Specific Phobias – Fear of flying, fear of heights and fear of open spaces are some typical specific phobias. People suffering from a specific phobia are overwhelmed by unreasonable fears, which they are unable to control. Exposure to feared situations can cause them extreme anxiety and panic, even if they recognize that their fears are illogical.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – A terrifying experience in which serious physical harm occurred or was threatened can cause post-traumatic stress disorder. Survivors of rape, child abuse, war or a natural disaster may develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Common symptoms include flashbacks, during which the person re-lives the terrifying experience, nightmares, depression and feelings of anger or irritability.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder – This is a condition in which people suffer from persistent unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and / or rituals (compulsions) which they find impossible to control. Typically, obsessions concern contamination, doubting (such as worrying that the iron hasn't been turned off) and disturbing sexual or religious thoughts. Compulsions include washing, checking, organizing and counting.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder – Characterized by repeated, exaggerated worry about routine life events and activities, this disorder lasts at least six months, during which time the person is affected by extreme worry more days than not. The individual anticipates the worst, even if others would say they have no reason to expect it. Physical symptoms can include nausea, trembling fatigue, muscle tension, or headache.

HOW CAN ANXIETY DISORDERS BE TREATED?

There are two main medical approaches to treating an anxiety disorder: (1) drug therapy and (2) cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). Combining the two types of treatment can be effective.

Because most anxiety disorders have at least some biological component, anti-depressants and anti-anxiety drugs are generally prescribed. It is important to inquire about possible side effects of any medication.

Therapeutic strategies can be effective in reducing symptoms in each of the anxiety disorders. The techniques used include cognitive restructuring, to help people turn their anxious thoughts, interpretations and predictions into thoughts which are more rational and less anxious. People with anxiety disorders may also benefit from controlled exposure to feared objects or situations.

Specific CBT techniques have been developed to help assist with particular anxiety disorders. People with panic disorder, for instance, can benefit from breathing retraining, which shows them how to slow their breathing and use meditation when they're feeling anxious.

Support groups and educational resources can also be included in treatment. Anxiety disorders place a great burden on the individuals affected, their families and friends. Learning all you can about the particular condition touching your life can help you develop tools for living with an anxiety disorder, or living with someone who has an anxiety disorder.

A proper diagnosis is key to putting a person with an anxiety disorder on the right treatment path. Many people go undiagnosed for 10 years or more. Since research suggests that many general health care practitioners are unaware of all the appropriate treatments for anxiety disorders, you might consider the option of a specialized anxiety disorder clinic. If such a facility is not available in your area, ask your doctor to look into specialized treatments.

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

For further information about anxiety disorders, contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to find out about support and resources available in your community.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a nation-wide, voluntary organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service.

Visit the CMHA website at www.cmha.ca today.

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This pamphlet provides general information and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice. If you think you need medical advice, please see your health professional.

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MENTALLY HEALTHY PEOPLE IN A HEALTHY SOCIETY



UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY DISORDERS

