

Anxiety: Understanding it and Treating it!

"Worry is a down payment on a problem you may never have"
Joyce Meyer

Anxiety is not the same as fear, even though it only occurs in situations perceived as uncontrollable or unavoidable, but not realistically so.

Anxiety has been described as agony, dread, terror, or even apprehension which is an emotional state of uneasiness about future uncertainties.

Anxiety is "a future-oriented mood state" in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with anticipated – and frequently misperceived – negative events. It is largely this distinction between future and present dangers which divides anxiety and fear.

While fear can be understood as short-lived and present-focused, geared towards a specific threat, anxiety on the other hand is defined as long-acting and future-focused, promoting excessive caution while approaching a potential threat. Importantly, anxiety interferes with constructive coping.

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. This is normal. Anxiety turns into a "disorder" – disruption to normal functioning - when anxiety and its sensations and symptoms interfere with a normal lifestyle since our physical and psychological functioning has been impaired.

Symptoms of anxiety can range in number, intensity, and frequency, depending on the person. While almost everyone has experienced anxiety at some point in their lives, most do not develop long-term problems with anxiety.

Anxiety can also be experienced in ways which include changes in sleeping patterns, nervous habits, and increased motor tension like foot tapping.

The behavioural effects of anxiety may include withdrawal from situations which have provoked anxiety in the past.

The emotional effects of anxiety may include feelings of apprehension or dread, one may have trouble concentrating, or feel tense or 'jumpy', anticipating the worst, irritability, restlessness, watching (and waiting) for signs (and occurrences) of danger, and feeling as though your "mind has gone blank".

High levels of anxiety can result in nightmares/bad dreams, obsessions about body sensations, a 'trapped in your mind' feeling, and often feeling like everything is 'scary'.

The cognitive effects of anxiety may include thoughts about suspected dangers, such as fear of dying. You may fear that chest pains are a deadly heart attack or that the shooting pains in your

head are the result of a tumour or aneurysm. You might, for instance, feel an intense fear when you think of dying, or you may think of dying more often than normal, or you just can't get the fear of dying out of your mind, and so on.

Because our bodies are somewhat chemically unique, the type, number, intensity, duration, and frequency of anxiety symptoms will vary from person to person. For example, one person might have mild anxiety and experience only a few symptoms, whereas another person might have the full spectrum of anxiety symptoms - and to great severity. All combinations and variations are common.

The majority of anxiety symptoms in women and men are similar, but there are some anxiety symptom differences. For example, anxiety causes stress hormones to enter the bloodstream where they travel to targeted spots in the body to bring about specific emergency response changes. These changes prepare the body for immediate action.

Since stress hormones affect other hormones, women can experience a wide range of sensations and symptoms owing to how stress hormones affect the hormones that affect the female menstruation cycle. Many women experience increases in anxiety-related symptoms in association with their monthly cycle. Women can also experience an increase in symptoms due to the biological changes of pregnancy, postpartum recovery, menopause and so on.

Women also tend to be more emotionally-centred than men, so their anxiety symptoms can often seem more numerous and daunting.

Men have challenges too, as stress hormones also affect male hormones. Men who are more emotionally-centred can also struggle more with anxiety symptoms.

Types of anxiety and symptoms

Problematic anxiety can be experienced in a number of ways. This is why there are specific types within the Anxiety Disorder spectrum. However, to a large extent, the treatment for anxiety-related problems is fairly similar.

Medical Advisory

Because there are many medical conditions that can cause anxiety-like sensations and symptoms, it is recommended that all new, changing, persistent, and recurring anxiety-like symptoms be discussed with your medical doctor. If your doctor concludes that your sensations and symptoms are solely stress related (including anxiety-caused stress), you can be confident that it is unlikely that there is another medical reason for your symptoms. Generally, most doctors can easily tell the difference between stress and anxiety-caused sensations and symptoms from symptoms caused by other medical conditions.

Self-help Approaches to Reducing Anxiety

Exercise is well known as a stress-relieving activity. Most forms of exercise will provide a benefit, and team sports and activities practiced in the outdoors seem to be particularly beneficial for stress reduction. Provided you are not overtraining, you will generally get a boost in mood from physical activity.

Talking to another human being about your worries can also be helpful, whether this is a supportive parent, spouse, friend, or even co-worker. However, ensure that you do this face-to-face or, if necessary, over the telephone since it has been shown that using e-mail or social networks to 'talk' about your 'troubles' does not have the same benefits. In fact, in some instances, it can even make it worse!

Music is also wonderfully helpful in calming one's 'nerves' and helping to reduce situational anxiety: Listening to your favourite tunes during times of stress can have an immediate improvement in your mood. There are many studies showing that music helps to relieve stress, reduce pain, and improve one's mood.

Physical touch is another form of therapy that is well-recognized for its benefits in reducing anxiety and promoting mental wellbeing. Massage, for instance, has been shown to reduce anxiety and stress by reducing cortisol and increasing serotonin and dopamine, all important hormones in the regulation of mood.

Finally, the most immediately accessible way to reduce anxiety in any situation, whether at home, at work, in the car, or any other places that seem to trigger your feelings of anxiety is to monitor and control one's breathing so that one takes slow and deep breathes in situations that you know from previous experience are likely to evoke strong feelings of anxiety. Deep breathing has been shown to help one relax as it decreases blood pressure, reduces cortisol, and slows the heart rate.

Anxiety treatment

If you still find that your levels of anxiety are beginning to interfere with your general day-to-day living, then give serious consideration to seeking professional help from a Clinical or Counselling Psychologist who has had experience of working successfully in this field.

For further information please contact:

Professor Christopher R. Stones (Clinical Psychologist and Behavioural Management Specialist)

Phone: 011-801-5616 (Reception) OR 083-222-9666

Alternatively send a booking request on: www.nhcltd.com

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