

LIVING WITH ANXIETY DISORDER



holding your hand through health

WHAT IS ANXIETY?



Just living life can cause us to worry, whether it is worry about our children, money, an upcoming test...the list is endless.¹

This worry or anxiety can be helpful in some ways, e.g. it may force us to be more cautious, or help us be more prepared for an exam.² However, worry or anxiety that does not seem to get better, or becomes worse and affects our everyday lives, may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.¹

What is an anxiety disorder and who suffers from it?

Anxiety disorders are common and may develop at any age. This may be due to a specific personality trait, a traumatic event in a person's life, or may simply happen for no reason at all.²

What type of anxiety disorder do I have?



- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) -**

Characterised by excessive and persistent worry over everyday issues that is difficult to control and occurs regularly, for at least six months.³

This excessive worry may cause physical symptoms such as: sleeplessness, fatigue, irritability and muscle tension.¹

- **Phobias** - Most people at some stage in their lives fear something, whether it is an animal, object or situation, but these feelings don't disrupt their lives. A phobia, however, is characterised by an overwhelming, irrational fear, which may compel you to adjust or change your life in order to avoid a certain situation or object.² Although you may know this fear is not reasonable, it is difficult to rationalise and even thinking about it causes great distress. Examples of this type of fear or anxiety may include fear of flying, insects, driving, etc.⁴



- **Agoraphobia** - Intentionally avoiding public places or leaving your home for fear of being in a situation where you may experience or have experienced anxiety, may be a typical sign of agoraphobia.²
- **Social anxiety disorder** - Finding difficulty in coping with everyday routines where other people are involved for fear of being scrutinised or judged. This may prevent you from wanting to form a relationship, go to school or to work. People may regard you as "being shy", but this fear is more than that.²
- **Panic attack and panic disorder** - A sudden onset of anxiety or fear for a short period of time, is called a "panic attack" or "anxiety attack."⁵ If you experience panic attacks regularly and for no apparent reason at all, even while you're sleeping, you may suffer from a panic disorder.⁶ People who suffer from a panic disorder tend to become anxious about experiencing future panic attacks.⁷

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF A PANIC ATTACK

A sudden sensation of fear during which at least 4 of the following 13 symptoms are experienced, could be classified as a panic attack:

- Discomfort in chest/ chest pain⁶
- Racing heartbeat (palpitations)⁶
- Trembling/ shaking⁶
- Trouble breathing (shortness of breath)^{5,6}
- Choking sensation⁶
- Dizziness or light-headedness⁵
- Sweating⁶
- Nausea and stomach ache⁶
- Fear of dying⁶
- Tingling sensation (“pins and needles”)⁶
- “Out of body” sensation⁶
- Waves of heat or cold⁶
- Fear of “losing control”⁶

These symptoms may be similar to the symptoms of some other life-threatening illnesses and therefore many people having a panic attack end up in emergency rooms fearing the worst.⁶

Can anything be done to help me?

If you suspect that you may have an anxiety disorder, it is important to see your doctor for help. Anxiety disorders are actual illnesses and not just something one can ignore or “get over” without help.² The doctor may prescribe medication to help relieve the symptoms or suggest that you speak to a professional counsellor, or both. Usually medication, lifestyle changes and therapy sessions go hand-in-hand to provide the best possible outcome.⁷

Some medications may be prescribed for a short period to help ease your immediate symptoms. However, these medications are not meant for long term use due to certain side-effects. Medications used for longer periods may take a few weeks before you begin to feel the benefit.⁷ Your doctor may need to change or add medication in order to find what works the best for you.¹

Counselling by a professional will help you to find helpful methods in dealing with your anxiety. Often, counselling for anxiety is the first port of call for people whose symptoms are not too severe.²

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Anxiety may also be associated with other illnesses or disorders, such as alcoholism, depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder and the doctor may need to evaluate and treat these illnesses as well.¹

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF?

In addition to professional treatment and counselling, there are a few tips that may help reduce anxiety:

- Join a self-help support group: chatting to people who also suffer from anxiety disorders may help you to better understand your disorder and also help you to take control of your anxiety¹
- Avoid smoking, caffeine, illegal drugs and even certain over-the-counter cold remedies, as these may increase the symptoms of anxiety^{1,7}
- Knowledge is power: read up on anxiety and panic disorder. Understanding your disorder goes a long way in reducing anxiety⁷
- Learn breathing and relaxation techniques: deep breathing techniques can help to control a panic attack. Relaxation techniques, such as yoga or meditation help you to de-stress and can also give you a feeling of wellbeing⁷

Helping a loved one with an anxiety disorder:²

DO

- ✓ Realise that the anxiety disorder is an illness
- ✓ Exercise patience as your loved one learns new coping mechanisms
- ✓ Be supportive and listen
- ✓ Establish boundaries
- ✓ Seek professional advice for your family if your loved one's anxiety disorder is affecting other members of your family

DON'T

- ✗ Blame the person for behaviours such as anger and frustration that may arise due to anxiety²
- ✗ Unwittingly add to your loved one's anxiety^{1f}
- ✗ Offer unwanted advice²
- ✗ Forget to ask for counselling for yourself if necessary²

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Remember, anxiety disorders are treatable. Receiving the correct professional advice as soon as possible will help you on your way to living your life without the heavy burden of an anxiety disorder.

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