

What is Anxiety?

Definition

Everyone experiences anxiety. Speaking in front of a group makes most of us anxious, but that motivates us to prepare and do well. Driving in heavy traffic is a common source of anxiety, but it keeps us alert and cautious to better avoid accidents. However, when feelings of intense fear and distress are overwhelming and prevent us from doing everyday things, an anxiety disorder may be the cause.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the United States. An estimated 40 million adults in the U.S., or 18%, have an anxiety disorder. Approximately 8% of children and teenagers experience the negative impact of an anxiety disorder at school and at home. Most people develop symptoms of anxiety disorders before age 21 and women are 60% more likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder than men.

Signs and Symptoms

Anxiety disorders are a group of related conditions, and each with unique symptoms. However, all anxiety disorders have one thing in common: persistent, excessive fear or worry in situations that are not threatening. People can experience one or more of the following symptoms:

Emotional symptoms:

- Feelings of apprehension or dread
- Feeling tense and jumpy
- Restlessness or irritability
- Anticipating the worst and being watchful for signs of danger

Physical symptoms:

- Pounding or racing heart and shortness of breath
- Upset stomach
- Sweating, tremors and twitches
- Headaches, fatigue and insomnia
- Upset stomach, frequent urination or diarrhea

Source: <http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders>

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Different anxiety disorders have various symptoms. This means that each type of anxiety disorder has its own treatment plan. The most common anxiety disorders include:

Panic Disorder

Characterized by panic attacks—sudden feelings of terror—sometimes striking repeatedly and without warning. Often mistaken for a heart attack, a panic attack causes powerful, physical symptoms including chest pain, heart palpitations, dizziness, shortness of breath and stomach upset. Many people will go to desperate measures to avoid having an attack, including social isolation or avoiding going to specific places.

Phobias

Everyone tries to avoid certain things or situations that make them uncomfortable or even fearful. However, for someone with a phobia, certain places, events or objects create powerful reactions of strong, irrational fear. Most people with specific phobias have several triggers. To avoid panicking, someone with specific phobias will work hard to avoid their triggers. Depending on the type and number of triggers, this fear and the attempt to control it can seem to take over a person's life.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

GAD produces chronic, exaggerated worrying about everyday life. This can consume hours each day, making it hard to concentrate or finish routine daily tasks. A person with GAD may become exhausted by worry and experience headaches, tension or nausea.

Social Anxiety Disorder

Unlike shyness, this disorder causes intense fear, often driven by irrational worries about social humiliation—“saying something stupid,” or “not knowing what to say.” Someone with social anxiety disorder may not take part in conversations, contribute to class discussions, or offer their ideas, and may become isolated. Panic attack symptoms are a common reaction.

Other anxiety disorders include: agoraphobia, separation anxiety disorder and substance/medication-induced anxiety disorder involving intoxication or withdrawal or medication treatment.

Causes

Scientists believe that many factors combine to cause anxiety disorders:

- **Genetics.** Some families will have a higher than average numbers of members experiencing anxiety issues, and studies support the evidence that anxiety disorders run in families. This can be a factor in someone developing an anxiety disorder.
- **Environment.** A stressful or traumatic event such as abuse, death of a loved one, violence or prolonged illness is often linked to the development of an anxiety disorder.

Diagnosis

The physical symptoms of an anxiety disorder can be easily confused with other medical conditions like heart disease or hyperthyroidism. Therefore, a doctor will likely perform an evaluation involving a physical examination, an interview and lab tests. After ruling out a medical illness, the doctor may recommend a person see a mental health professional to make a diagnosis.

Using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) a mental health professional is able to identify the specific type of anxiety disorder causing the symptoms as well as any other possible disorders including depression, ADHD or substance abuse which may be involved.

Tackling all disorders through comprehensive treatment is the best recovery strategy.

Treatment

As each anxiety disorder has a different set of symptoms, the types of treatment that a mental health professional may suggest also can vary. But there are common types of treatment that are used:

- [Psychotherapy](#), including cognitive behavioral therapy
- [Medications](#), including antianxiety medications and antidepressants
- [Complementary health approaches](#), including stress and relaxation techniques