

What Are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety disorders are the most common of emotional disorders and affect more than 25 million Americans. Many forms and symptoms may include:

- **Overwhelming feelings of panic and fear**
- **Uncontrollable obsessive thoughts**
- **Painful, intrusive memories**
- **Recurring nightmares**
- **Physical symptoms such as feeling sick to your stomach, “butterflies” in your stomach, heart pounding, startling easily, and muscle tension**

Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness. Untreated anxiety disorders can push people into avoiding situations that trigger or worsen their symptoms. People with anxiety disorders are likely to suffer from depression, and they also may abuse alcohol and other drugs in an effort to gain relief from their symptoms. Job performance, school work, and personal relationships can also suffer.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

PANIC DISORDER

The core symptom of panic disorder is the panic attack, an overwhelming combination of physical and psychological distress. During an attack several of these symptoms occur in combination:

- **Pounding heart or chest pain**
- **Sweating, trembling, shaking**
- **Shortness of breath, sensation of choking**
- **Nausea or abdominal pain**
- **Dizziness or lightheadedness**
- **Feeling unreal or disconnected**
- **Fear of losing control, “going crazy,” or dying**
- **Numbness**
- **Chills or hot flashes**

Because symptoms are so severe, many people with panic disorder believe they are having a heart attack or other life-threatening illness.

PHOBIAS

A phobia is excessive and persistent fear of a specific object, situation, or activity. These fears cause such distress that some people go to extreme lengths to avoid what they fear.

There are three types of phobias:

Specific phobia — An extreme or excessive fear of an object or situation that is generally not harmful. Patients know their fear is excessive, but they can't overcome it. Examples are fear of flying or fear of spiders.

Social phobia (also called social anxiety disorder) — Significant anxiety and discomfort about being embarrassed or looked down on in social or performance situations. Common examples are public speaking, meeting people, or using public restrooms.

Agoraphobia — This is the fear of being in situations where escape may be difficult or embarrassing or help might not be available in the event of panic symptoms. Untreated agoraphobia can become so serious that a person may refuse to leave the house. A person can only receive a diagnosis of phobia when their fear is intensely upsetting, or if it significantly interferes with their normal daily activities.

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

Obsessions are upsetting and irrational thoughts which keep reoccurring. They cause great anxiety, which cannot be controlled through reasoning. Common obsessions include preoccupations with dirt or germs, nagging doubts, and a need to have things in a very particular order. To minimize these obsessions, many people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) engage in repeated behavior, or compulsions. Examples include repeated hand washing, constant rechecking to satisfy doubts, and following rigid rules of order. Compulsive behavior can be very disruptive to normal daily routines and social relationships.

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) occurs in individuals who have survived a severe or terrifying physical or emotional event. People with PTSD may have recurrent nightmares, intrusive memories, or even have flashbacks, where the event seems to be happening all over again. They feel extreme distress when in circumstances that remind them of the trauma, and go to extremes to avoid these situations. Additional symptoms include:

- **Feeling numb or detached**
- **Trouble sleeping**
- **Feeling jittery or on guard**
- **Irritability**

Events that can trigger PTSD include military combat, a violent personal attack, natural disasters, tragedies (e.g., plane crash), physical or sexual abuse during childhood, or witnessing another person's serious injury.

GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

People with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) have ongoing, severe tension that interferes with daily functioning. They worry constantly and feel helpless to control these worries. Often their worries focus on job responsibilities, family health, or minor matters such as chores, car repairs, or appointments. They may have problems sleeping,

muscle aches/tension, and feel shaky, weak and headachy. People with GAD can be irritable and often have problems concentrating and working effectively.

What Causes Anxiety Disorders?

The causes of anxiety disorders are currently unknown, although research has provided several clues. Areas of the brain that control fear responses may have a role in some anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders can run in families, suggesting that a combination of genes and environmental stresses can produce the disorders. The role of brain chemistry is also being investigated.

Treatment

Although each anxiety disorder has its own unique characteristics, most respond well to two types of treatment: psychotherapy and medications. These treatments can be given alone or in combination. Treatment can give significant relief from symptoms, but not always a complete cure.

There are several effective medications and psychotherapies. Because treatment often requires several weeks to work best, a psychiatrist should follow the patient's progress and make necessary changes.

Unfortunately, many people with anxiety disorders don't seek help. They don't realize that they have an illness that has known causes and effective treatments. Other people fear their family, friends or coworkers might criticize them if they get help. If you or someone you know have any of the symptoms in this pamphlet, consult a psychiatrist, non-psychiatric physician, or other mental health professional for a thorough examination.

Resources

For more information, please contact:

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

1000 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
703-907-7300
www.healthyminds.org

Let's Talk Facts About Anxiety Disorders



Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA)

8730 Georgia Avenue
Suite 600
Silver Spring, MD 20910
240-485-1001
www.adaa.org

National Mental Health Association (NMHA)

2001 N. Beauregard Street
12th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
800-969-NMHA (6642)
www.nmha.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd.
Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
703-524-7600
Information Helpline:
800-950-NAMI (6264)
www.nami.org

One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigmas associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.healthyminds.org.