



Anxiety

Getting stressed out at work is natural - it happens to everyone. Everyone frets or feels anxious from time to time. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. Mild to moderate anxiety can be an effective means of helping you focus your attention, energy, and motivation. In general, it can help you cope. But there's a difference between being stressed out by situations like a first date or a business presentation and having an excessive, irrational fear of everyday situations. Anxiety that becomes overwhelming and interferes with daily life can become a disabling disorder.

If anxiety is severe, you may have feelings of helplessness, confusion and extreme worry that are out of proportion with the actual seriousness or likelihood of the feared event. This type of anxiety could be a sign of an anxiety disorder. Some quick facts about anxiety disorders:

- An estimated 19 million adult Americans suffer from anxiety disorders.
- Women are twice as likely as men to have problems with anxiety disorders, and this problem can occur at any age.
- Generalized anxiety disorders often occur with other problems, such as depression, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). An anxiety disorder also can be caused by a physical problem, such as heart or lung disease.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS TO LOOK FOR?

Anxiety can cause physical and emotional symptoms. A specific situation or fear can cause some or all of the symptoms listed below for a short time. When the situation passes, the symptoms should go away. If symptoms linger, you should seek help from a mental health professional who can assess whether or not you are suffering from an anxiety disorder. Physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Trembling, twitching, or shaking.
- Feeling tired or run-down.
- Feeling of fullness in the throat or chest.
- Shortness of breath or rapid heartbeat.
- Lightheadedness or dizziness.
- Sweating or cold, clammy hands.
- Excessive startle reflex.
- Muscle tension, aches, or soreness.
- Sleep problems, such as the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, early waking, or restless, unsatisfying sleep.

Anxiety can make creative expression harder and make it more difficult to function well in a relationship. It affects the part of the brain that helps control creativity and complex communication. Emotional symptoms of anxiety can include:

- Restlessness, irritability, or feeling on edge.
- Excessive worrying.
- Fearing that something bad is going to happen, a sense of impending doom.
- Inability to concentrate; "blinking out."
- Constant feelings of sadness.

COMMON TYPES OF ANXIETY DISORDERS

There are several types of anxiety disorders. They each have their own distinct features, but they all have the common bond of excessive, irrational fear. Some of the more common disorders include:

Panic Disorder. People with panic disorder have *panic attacks* - feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly. They can't predict when an attack will occur, and many develop intense anxiety between attacks, worrying when and where the next one will strike. People having a panic attack feel their heart pound and may feel sweaty, weak, faint or dizzy. They may have an irrational fear something bad is going to happen, or loss of control.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). OCD involves anxious thoughts or rituals a person feels they can't control. They may feel an urgent need to engage in certain rituals and often have persistent, unwelcome thoughts or images. The disturbing thoughts or images are called obsessions, and the rituals performed to try and prevent or get rid of them are called compulsions. There is no pleasure in carrying out the rituals, just a temporary relief from the anxiety that grows when they aren't performed. For example, you may be obsessed with germs or dirt, so you wash your hands over and over again. Many with this condition recognize the senselessness of what they're doing, but they can't stop it. For people with OCD, these rituals can be distressing, taking hours a day and altering normal life.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). This is much more than the type of normal anxiety healthy people experience day to day. Days are filled with exaggerated worry and tension, even though there is little or nothing to provoke it. These people can't seem to "snap out of it" and shake concerns, although they often realize their anxiety is much more intense than situations warrant. They experience physical symptoms of anxiety and are unable to relax.

Social Anxiety Disorder. Also called social phobia, it brings about extreme self-consciousness and overwhelming anxiety in everyday situations. It can be limited to certain types of situations, such as eating in front of others, or it can be so broad that the person experiences symptoms almost any time they are around others. They commonly feel as though all eyes are focused on them and feel painfully embarrassed.

Specific Phobias. A person's intense fear of something that poses little or no danger - fear of flying, spiders, escalators or closed-in spaces, as examples.

Anxiety disorders are real, serious, and treatable. Although treatment is individualized, there are several standard approaches that have proven to be effective. Most individuals respond well to medications and/or targeted counseling from qualified mental health professionals. WellSpan Employee Assistance Program can help. Call the EAP office nearest you for more information.

(Information for this resource sheet taken from the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) and the National Institute of Mental Health NIMH.)