

Adult Anxiety Disorders

What are Anxiety Disorders?

Most people feel nervous or uneasy when they start a new job, go to the dentist, or take on a significant new challenge. In response to these situations, they might feel worried, experience stomach aches, sweaty hands, or their heart might beat faster. These are normal reactions to stressful events or situations.

People who have clinical anxiety or anxiety disorders experience much stronger versions of these normal reactions, whether or not a stressful event is present. The feelings of anxiety or worry cannot be controlled by will power, and they often come and go in unpredictable ways. They may interfere with everyday life and keep someone from their usual activities.

Anxiety Disorders are common - about 18% of American adults experience some type of anxiety disorder each year.

There are different kinds of Anxiety Disorders, including:

- Panic Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Phobias
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Panic Disorder is characterized by repeated and often unexpected attacks of intense fear. These attacks may occur at any time, come on suddenly, and typically take 10 to 15 minutes to reach their greatest intensity. Panic attacks may include physical symptoms such as:

- Chest pain
- Dizziness
- Fast heartbeat
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea

Someone who is experiencing a panic attack may feel frightened, confused and believe that he or she is dying, losing control or "going crazy". Many individuals experience one panic attack and never have another. However, since panic attacks may occur at any time, many individuals worry about the possibility of having another attack. Both heredity and stressful experiences may have a role in causing Panic Disorder which is experienced more commonly by women than men.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (also called OCD) is characterized by repeated upsetting thoughts (called obsessions) or ritual behaviors (called compulsions) that a person cannot easily control or stop. Common obsessive thoughts may include worries that a person will hurt someone or that germs will contaminate them. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is equally common among men and women. There is growing evidence that Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is caused by genetic and/or biological factors.

Phobias are intense, overwhelming fears connected to specific objects or situations. People who experience phobias may limit their activities and thus miss important life experiences. There are three main kinds of Phobias:

Specific phobia involves fear of a particular thing, such as an animal, heights or injections. People who experience Specific Phobias may have panic attacks. These are the most common Phobias:

- Social Phobia (Social Anxiety Disorders) is characterized by an excessive fear of being criticized or embarrassed in front of other people.
- Agoraphobia is an intense fear of being in a situation that is difficult to get out of quickly, such as a crowd or a car. People who experience Agoraphobia may have panic attacks. This phobia may keep a person from leaving his or her home. Women's risk is twice as high as men's to develop Agoraphobia.
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder may be diagnosed when a person has excessive worry and tension about a number of different things regularly for at least six months. In addition to anxiety, people with Generalized Anxiety Disorder may have physical symptoms such as headaches, tiredness and muscle tension. It usually runs in families and is worse when a person is stressed.

Separation Anxiety Disorder results in extreme distress, worry, and physical symptoms that are triggered when a person is separated from the people to whom he or she is most attached. There is an excessive amount of worry about the well-being or death of attachment figures, usually when separated from them. There is also persistent and extreme worry about events that might separate someone from those they are most attached to (for example: getting lost, being kidnapped, or having an accident).

Separation Anxiety is not diagnosed when people are living in truly dangerous situations where they could be hurt when they are away from home.

What causes Anxiety Disorders?

Research suggests that Anxiety Disorders are caused by both biological and psychological factors. Anxiety Disorders also tend to run in families. Studies have shown that people with Anxiety Disorders have an increased physical and psychological reaction to stress. They react more quickly and more intensely to situations that they perceive to be dangerous. Some medical conditions can cause the same symptoms as Anxiety Disorders. It is therefore important to have a thorough medical examination to rule out other possible causes of anxiety symptoms.

How can Anxiety Disorders be treated?

Treatment for Anxiety Disorders often combines medications and specific types of talk therapies (counseling) such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy helps clients who experience anxiety disorders identify and understand how their thoughts are related to their anxiety symptoms. Learning tools such as relaxation techniques as well as ways to shift one's thinking, can help reduce anxiety symptoms.