

Childhood Anxiety Disorders

What are Anxiety Disorders?

Many children and adolescents feel anxious or stressed on the first day in a new school or when they have problems with their friends. They worry, their hearts beat faster, and they have butterfly feelings in their stomachs. These are usual anxious reactions connected to stresses in their lives; the reactions come and go with the stressful moments.

Clinical Anxiety or Anxiety Disorders are more intense and longer lasting versions of these normal feelings, and they are not always directly connected to specific, identifiable stress. Young people who experience Anxiety Disorders feel intense fear and worry, and may demonstrate difficulty with concentration. They also may develop problems sleeping and have physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, nausea, and changes in weight and appetite. Anxiety Disorders cannot be controlled by will power, and they often come and go in unpredictable ways. They interfere with young persons' everyday lives and keep them from doing usual activities.

Anxiety Disorders are the most common mental illnesses in the United States; about 13 percent of American children and adolescents are affected by Anxiety Disorders each year.

Among the different kinds of Anxiety Disorders that affect children and adolescents are Separation Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Phobias, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder:

Separation Anxiety Disorder results in extreme distress, worry and physical symptoms that are triggered when a young person is separated from the people to whom he or she is most attached. Most often the fear and worry are related to a concern that harm will come to a loved one in the child's absence. Having trouble separating from familiar people is expected of very young children, but the difficulty should lessen as a child grows older.

Separation Anxiety is likely to cause the most trouble when a child or adolescent must stay in a place that they cannot easily leave and return home, such as school or camp. Young persons who experience Separation Anxiety can often go to friends' homes or out shopping without getting anxious because they can go home when they choose.

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

About four percent of children and adolescents are diagnosed with Separation Anxiety Disorder. It often develops after the child or adolescent has had a traumatic experience.

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

Experientially, a young person may feel frightened and confused and believe that he or she is dying. Children and adolescents who experience Panic Disorder are often worried between attacks about when the next attack will occur.

Panic Disorder is rare in young children. Research shows evidence that both heredity and stressful experiences may have a role in causing Panic Disorder.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (also called OCD) is characterized by repeated upsetting thoughts (called obsessions) or ritual behaviors (called compulsions) that a young person cannot control easily or stop. Common obsessive thoughts include worries about contamination, serious illness and excessive doubt. Compulsive behaviors often occur in response to these obsessive thoughts. Common compulsions include excessive repetitions of: counting, cleaning (of self and/or environment), rituals, and unusual attention to symmetry. An important aspect of OCD is that discontinuing or interfering with a compulsive behavior can cause the child or adolescent significant distress.

It is estimated that one to three percent of children and adolescents are diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and it is diagnosed more frequently among boys than girls. There is growing evidence that Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is caused by genetic and biological factors, although environmental factors may also play a role.

Phobias are intense, overwhelming fears connected to specific objects or situations. Most children have fears, but they do not get in the way of their everyday life. Children and adolescents who experience phobias may avoid some normal activities and miss

important life experiences. There are two main kinds of Phobias in childhood and adolescence:

- Specific Phobias involve fear of a particular thing such as an animal, heights or injections. Children who experience Specific Phobias often outgrow them. Adolescents who experience Specific Phobias may also experience panic attacks.
- Children who experienced Social Phobia are extremely fearful of criticism or embarrassment in front of other people, especially people he or she does not know well. A common social phobia is fear of public speaking.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is diagnosed when a child or adolescent has regularly experienced excessive worry and tension for at least six months. In addition to anxiety, young people diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder may have physical symptoms such as headaches, tiredness and muscle tension. Generalized Anxiety Disorder usually runs in families and can become worse when a young person is stressed.

What causes Anxiety Disorders?

Research suggests that anxiety disorders are caused by both biological and psychological factors. Stress can trigger Anxiety Disorders. Anxiety Disorders also tend to run in families. Studies have shown that children and adolescents with Anxiety Disorders have an increased physical and psychological reaction to stress. They react more quickly and more intensely even to a small perceived danger. Other physical and psychological conditions can cause the same symptoms as Anxiety Disorders. It is 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 talking therapies. Effective medications are available to treat Anxiety Disorders. Behavioral Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy are two effective talking therapies. Behavioral Therapy focuses on changing specific behaviors and uses techniques to stop unwanted behaviors. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches ways to identify, understand and change the ways children and adolescents think about stressful things.

Treatment for Anxiety Disorders in children and adolescents involves a young person meeting individually with a therapist for talking therapies and also with a psychiatrist if

medication is a part of treatment. Parents meet with their child's therapist to learn ways to manage their child's anxieties and to help reduce them. Treatment for adolescents usually involves therapist's work with parents, but to a lesser extent.

Additional Information about Anxiety Disorders

Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General

<http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/ps/access/NNBBHS.pdf>

This is the first report on mental health from the United States Surgeon General. It was issued in December 1999. This site gives a clear summary of the different Anxiety Disorders in children and adolescents, including causes, symptoms and treatments.

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

<http://www.adaa.org/GettingHelp/FocusOn/Children&Adolescents.asp>

This is a national organization that promotes the prevention and cure of anxiety disorders and works to improve the lives of people who have Anxiety Disorders. This site has short descriptions of the Anxiety Disorders in children and adolescents. It also has a questionnaire for parents concerned about anxiety problems in children.

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

NIMH is an agency of the United States government. This site has clear information about mental health conditions and provides information on how individuals and family members can recognize symptoms and get the help they need.

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

<http://www.nami.org/helpline/ocd.htm>

This is a very respected grass roots family movement that began over 20 years ago. It does effective self-help and advocacy for people with mental illnesses, including Anxiety Disorders. This site gives helpful information about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in children and adolescents.