

## **Anxiety**

Anxiety is a simplistic blanket term which covers a wide range of problems from the temporary effects of stress to panic attacks, compulsions, phobias or debilitating nervous illness previously known as a 'nervous breakdown'. Common in all these complaints is the overwhelming effect of the body producing too much adrenaline resulting in physical symptoms which affect daily life. The very fear and apprehension of this, which include palpitations and shaking, arouses further production of adrenaline which increases the problems. For some people it is a temporary state which passes when the source of stress subsides, while for others it becomes a long-term condition which affects their lives and those of their loved ones.

It is normal and healthy to feel sad or worried about life with its problems and pressures, but when worry casts a cloud over everyday life you may be suffering from anxiety or depression or a mixture of the two.

A quarter of the population will suffer from anxiety at some time in their lives - even more than those affected by depression. It is the major reason for absence from work. The fear-adrenaline-fear cycle, can if unbroken, eventually brings about a state of stress and extreme fatigue.

### **Symptoms of anxiety**

Headaches, Tiredness – often extreme, Palpitations, Heart pains, Head pains Shaking, Sweating, Churning Stomach, Sleeplessness, Panic Attacks, Lump in throat, Giddiness, Weight Loss, Obsessive thoughts, Diarrhoea, Anti-social behaviour.

### **General anxiety**

We all have basic emotions like love, hate, anger, fear and sadness to help us manage our lives and survive. Emotions are movement-based and have a beginning, peak and resolution. They bring with them chemical changes in the body which have aided our survival from threats and danger. The release of adrenaline which gives us an energy surge for 'flight or fight' from danger can trigger a debilitating cycle.

Anxiety and depression have little movement and can hang like black clouds, bringing no change or resolution, but the chemical impact is overwhelming and often unchanging. Anxiety is a fear with no subject, an overwhelming disabling worry which dominates life. As it becomes more powerful, the sufferer can slide into a vicious spiral, becoming anxious about being anxious.

### **Effects of anxiety**

Relationships can be affected as the anxious person withdraws from social contact and the people around them. If their behaviour is dominated by the anxiety it can affect their partner, family and colleagues who sense rejection or despair. Anxiety is often accompanied by intense mental and physical sensations which can convince the sufferer that they cannot cope with work, family life or ordinary social contact. Their withdrawal and increasing pre-occupation with their symptoms increases the effects and isolation. Cold sweats, trembling, tingling and palpitations are common symptoms in both anxiety and depression, which often interact.

The physical and mental symptoms create a cycle which is easily triggered causing the sufferer to avoid others. Anticipating disasters and dwelling on their symptoms can dominate the life of an anxious person and put pressure on friends and relatives who may themselves feel depleted and drained. Anxiety feeds on fear, like a bully, and needs to be confronted, appropriately and safely, with skills and constructive thinking patterns.

### **Causes**

The symptoms of anxiety-related problems are caused by accumulation of adrenaline in the body usually triggered by an over-sensitised nervous system. Anxiety and depression can run in families as a result of learned and copied behaviour or a genetic disposition. Drugs, legal and illegal, can alter moods and may trigger anxiety. An illness, shocking experience or trauma may also leave us with a tendency to be anxious.

This trigger may be as a result of an external trauma or an internal one. External traumas can include: life-threatening accidents, haemorrhage, operation or illness, pregnancy, massive shock, long established medical problem which has depleted the body's resources. Internal traumas can include deep-seated guilt, shame, conflict or sorrow, and may be deeply buried.

Whether these can be safely uncovered or whether that will reactivate anxiety must be considered by a qualified practitioner. It may be more appropriate to deal with the symptoms first. Once the response is triggered the system produces an inappropriate amount of adrenaline. Rather than allowing the 'flight' response that allowed our ancestors to flee from danger this merely alarms the sufferer further – and in turn increases adrenaline production which puts the system on red alert with sleeplessness, a racing heart and restless body.

### **When is the right time to seek help?**

Anxiety is a problem which feeds on itself and is often covered up and dealt with in isolation. Help should be sought as soon as possible. If physical symptoms are severe consult your GP as first port of call. Counselling may help to face the fears and rebuild self-esteem.

### **What aspects of anxiety can Counselling address?**

- Co-manage getting life back to normal
- Help to define and reframe your most common anxieties
- Help you to manage and understand anxiety or panic attacks
- Learn to manage your life better through meeting your needs
- Understand your own limits and triggers for anxiety and stress
- Help to confront and tolerate your fears
- Understanding the effects of your self-esteem and expectations

Consider the wider context of your relationships and their effect. Sometimes understanding where an anxiety originated can help realise a new perspective. Relaxation techniques such as guided visualisation and muscle tension are two techniques that can be used to break the cycle.

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*adapted from content written/edited by Denise Pickup BACP (Accred) in 2011. The content is for general information only and may or may not relate to your individual situation.*