

HEALTH IN OUR HANDS!

The Arkansas State University Wellness Program Newsletter
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Anxiety Disorders

Overview

Everyone feels anxious at some time during their life. Many people feel anxious before tests, public speaking, making important decisions, or during significant events. However, when that anxiety interferes with daily life, it becomes a disorder. The anxiety must be present for at least six months and if it is left untreated it can get worse. Anxiety disorders commonly present with other mental or physical illnesses.

Anxiety affects people differently but general symptoms include:

- Overwhelming feelings of panic or fear
- Uncontrollable obsessive thoughts
- Recurring nightmares
- Physical symptoms such as GI distress and increased heart rate

Anxiety disorders affect more than 25 million Americans. Most anxiety disorders start in childhood, adolescence or early adulthood. They occur slightly more frequently in females than in males. There is equal prevalence in whites, African-

Americans and Hispanics. An anxiety disorder is a serious mental illness. There are several types of anxiety disorders.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

All anxiety disorders cluster around an irrational and excessive feeling of fear or avoidance. However, each disorder has its own unique symptoms. Some example of anxiety disorders include:

Obsessive-compulsive disorder → People have irrational thoughts about performing certain rituals or routines. Rituals are referred to as compulsions. The thoughts are obsessive. Common obsessions include germs, having a particular order, and hoarding. This behavior can be disruptive to normal daily routines and detrimental for social relationships.

Panic disorder → People with this disorder have feelings of trepidation that strike unexpectedly and repeated. When a person has a panic attack they have an

overwhelming combination of physical and psychological distress. Symptoms include pounding heart, sweating, trembling, shaking, shortness of breath, sensation of choking, nausea or abdominal pain, dizziness, feeling of losing control or dying, numbness, chills or hot flashes.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

→ This occurs in people that have survived a traumatic or terrifying physical or emotional event. People with this disorder tend to have reoccurring thoughts or memories of the event and be emotionally disoriented. They feel extreme distress during activities that remind them of the event and will avoid these situations with urgency. Symptoms include flashbacks, feelings of numbness or detachment, trouble sleeping, being on guard and irritable.

Social anxiety disorder → This is also known as a social phobia. They have overwhelming feelings of worry and being self-conscious about social situations. The fear stems from feelings of being judged by others, embarrassment, and

being ridiculed. Common examples are giving public speeches, meeting new people or using public restrooms.

Specific phobias → This is when a person has an excessive and consistent fear of a specific object, situation or activity. This causes severe distress and people will go to extremes to avoid the situation. Patients typically know their reaction is an inappropriate level of fear, but they cannot overcome it. Common phobias include the fear of heights, snakes, or spiders.

Generalized anxiety disorder → This disorder is when people have unrealistic fear and apprehension when there is little to provoke the anxiety. The feelings of tension and panic interfere with daily functioning. They feel helpless with worrying. They often feel anxious about activities of daily life such as job responsibilities, family health or even minor matters such as chores or driving. The symptoms include problems sleeping, muscle aches/tension, feeling shaky, weak and having headaches. Often people with this disorder are irritable and have problems concentrating and being productive.

Causes of Anxiety Disorders

The exact cause of anxiety disorders is unknown. Anxiety disorders should never be interrupted as personal weakness, a character flaw, or poor upbringing. There are some theories on the exact cause. Changes in the chemical imbalance in the brain are caused by severe or long-lasting

stress. The areas in the brain that control our responses to fear could be involved with anxiety disorders. There could be changes in the structure of the brain that control mood or memory. Anxiety disorders have been reported to run in families suggesting a genetic component and environmental stresses being a source. There is research still going on in this area to identify the root cause of each anxiety disorder.

Diagnosing

A doctor can begin diagnosing you by asking questions about medical history and performing a physical exam. The doctor may perform various tests to rule out a physical illness. After seeing a general physician, you may be referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist that are trained in diagnosing and treating mental illnesses. They will use assessment tools specially designed to identify the anxiety disorder. The diagnosis is based upon the intensity and duration of the symptoms. They will evaluate the level of interference with activities of daily living. A patient's attitude and behavior will be observed during the interview. After all of this is completed the general physician, psychiatrist or psychologist can make an accurate diagnosis.

Treatment

In the last two decades there has been lots of progress in treating anxiety disorders. The treatment depends on the exact diagnosis, nevertheless one or a combination of the following methods are used:

Medication – Anti-depressants and anxiety-reducing drugs can help manage the disorder.

Psychotherapy – Counseling that addresses the emotional response to the anxiety disorder. Trained professionals will talk with the patient to help with strategies dealing with and understanding their disorder.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy – This therapy involves helping the patient recognize and change their thought patterns and behaviors to avoid the symptoms of their anxiety disorder.

Other treatments – Learning relaxation techniques, changing dietary or lifestyle habits and joining a support group.

References

- <http://healthyminds.org>
- www.webmd.com
- www.nimh.nih.gov

Other News:

**If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at hanrahan@astate.edu.

The Arkansas State University Employee Wellness Newsletter is published monthly during the academic year by the College of Nursing and Health Professions. Health questions can be addressed to Dean Susan Hanrahan, Ph.D., ext. 3112 or hanrahan@astate.edu. Produced by Michelle Williams, graduate student in the College of Nursing and Health Professions, Physical Therapy Program.