

Understanding and Treating Anxiety

ANXIETY
REDUCTION



Everybody has some familiarity with anxiety. Anxiety is the feeling of worry, apprehension, fear and/or panic in response to situations which seem overwhelming, threatening, unsafe or uncomfortable. You may experience anxiety as an intense worry before a final exam, the nervousness felt before making a presentation, or the heightened alertness when you believe you are in danger. Anxiety is your body's way of alerting you that some kind of action is needed in the face of a situation that is perceived to be threatening or dangerous. Therefore, anxiety can be useful or adaptive whenever it prompts you to take appropriate action in response to an anxiety-provoking situation. For example, anxiety can motivate you to study for an exam or organize a presentation or leave a situation that feels unsafe. However, anxiety can also be detrimental, especially if it becomes overwhelming and prevents you from taking appropriate actions or prompts you to take actions that are counterproductive. Anxiety

may be detrimental if you avoid studying for a major exam that worries you, or if you cope with worry about your relationship by getting unnecessarily suspicious and then yelling at your partner. This brochure will help you distinguish between normal or expected anxiety that everyone experiences and anxiety problems which may require intervention.

Because the feeling of anxiety is frequently intense and distressing, it is quite normal to want to avoid or eliminate these feelings. However, this is not necessarily the best approach to anxiety. If you ignore or try to eliminate your anxieties, you miss out on valuable information about your life and about your options for dealing with unavoidably stressful and demanding situations. It is often a better approach to begin with assessing the degree to which your anxiety works for you or is excessive and a source of problems for you.

Since anxiety is a basic human emotion, like sadness, how do you know if anxiety is a problem? The following will help you determine whether anxiety could be partly responsible for some of the problems you are experiencing:

- Do I feel anxious more often than not throughout my day?
- Have I restricted my activities as a way of coping with anxiety?
- Do I experience panic or panic-like symptoms in certain predictable situations?
- Am I intensely fearful of specific situations or things (e.g., animals)?
- Do I experience acute anxiety in social situations?
- Have I developed elaborate rituals or thought-processes to manage anxiety?

- Is my anxiety related to a specific, traumatic event?

If you answered yes to some of the previous questions, you may have more specific questions about the anxiety symptoms you have been experiencing. The following are various conditions for which anxiety is the predominant feature.

Types of Anxiety

Panic Disorder: A panic attack is defined as a period of intense fear or discomfort accompanied by physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling and chest pain as well as cognitive symptoms such as fear of losing control and/or dying.

Specific Phobia: The anxiety in specific phobia is associated with persistent, excessive and unreasonable fear when there is an anticipated or actual encounter with a specific object or situation. Some examples of specific phobias include fear of certain animals, fear of heights, fear of blood or fear of places such as bridges or elevators.

Social Phobia: Social phobia is defined as a marked and persistent fear of a social situation or a performance in which embarrassment is considered to be a likely outcome. A fear of public speaking is one of the more common forms of social phobia.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: An obsession is defined as persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses or images which are intrusive, anxiety-provoking and distressing. A compulsion is a ritualistic behavior which is intended to modify or reduce the anxiety through activity or behavior. The most frequent compulsions involve washing and cleaning, counting, seeking assurances, checking and/or repeating actions.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The anxiety in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is clearly associated with a traumatic event that the person experienced or witnessed and was associated with intense fear, horror or helplessness. There may be avoidance of any situations associated with the original trauma and other anxiety-related symptoms such as hyper-vigilance or exaggerated startle response.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: The primary feature of Generalized Anxiety Disorder is excessive anxiety and worry which occurs more days than not for a period of at least six months. In addition, symptoms of restlessness, fatigue, concentration problems, irritability, muscle tension and sleep disturbance may be present. The anxiety is perceived by the individual as being difficult to control or regulate.

Treatment of Anxiety

If anxiety symptoms are interfering with your ability to do routine, day-to-day activities, or if you have restricted your life activities as a way of coping with anxiety, you should consider seeking professional help. There are currently a variety of highly effective interventions available for the treatment of anxiety, including psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral therapies, and medication

What Can I Do?

It is usually helpful to identify the events surrounding the experience of anxiety:

- What provokes the anxiety?
- What thoughts or physical sensations accompany the anxiety?
- How distressing is the anxiety?
- How are you coping with the anxiety?

Exploring these accompanying events may provide useful information about the nature of the anxiety as well as possible strategies for reducing it. In addition, there are specific changes you can make that may help alleviate anxiety symptoms:

- Exercise or engage in some form of daily physical activity
- Eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet
- Obtain an adequate amount of sleep
- Seek emotional support from friends and family
- Focus on positive aspects of your life
- Establish realistic, attainable goals which do not rely on perfectionistic values
- Monitor how you think about stress and reduce and/or change thoughts which are negative
- Identify activities which feel overwhelming and reduce your involvement or seek ways to make them more manageable
- Consult with a physician if you are experiencing any medical problems
- Consult with a mental health professional if you continue to be concerned about your anxiety
- Reduce or eliminate the use of alcohol and drugs and limit caffeine intake
- Don't engage in "emotional reasoning" (e.g., "because I feel awful, my life is terrible")
- Don't assume responsibility for events which are outside of your control

Suggestions for intervening with an anxious friend

- Be empathic and understanding
- Don't minimize the severity of anxiety symptoms
- Avoid critical or shaming statements

- Encourage coping strategies which don't rely on avoidance of anxiety-provoking stimuli
- Challenge expressions of hopelessness
- Don't argue about how bad things are
- Don't become angry even though your efforts may be resisted or rejected
- Advocate for treatment of anxiety
- Consult with a mental health professional if an anxious friend refuses necessary treatment

Resources

1. [The National Institute of Mental Health Website](#)
2. [The National Mental Health Association Website](#)
3. *An End to Panic: Breakthrough Techniques for Overcoming Panic Disorder.* (2000). Elke Zuercher-White. Fine Communications.
4. *Mastery of Your Anxiety and Worry: Client Workbook.* (2000). David Barlow and Michelle Craske. Psychological Corporation.
5. *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook. 2nd edition.* (2000). Edmund J. Bourne. New Harbinger Publications.
6. *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. 4th edition.* (1997). Martha Davis, Matthew McKay, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Valerie Winemuller. New Harbinger Publications.

Information above adapted from: <http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/>

Available on-campus services for you

If you feel that you have additional questions regarding this topic or you struggle with a specific personal problem feel free to contact the Mental Health Counseling Service, which is a confidential (outsourced) on-campus service for students. You may set an appointment with an MH Counselor during counseling office hours in person, or via e-mail: mhc@human-service.hu or by phone # (+36) 30-386-9898.

Did you know that as a student you are entitled to attend six (one hour long) sessions/talks with a professional MH counselor on-campus for free?