What Are Anxiety Disorders?

**From the BlackDog institute:**

It’s important to get help to treat anxiety disorders. Left untreated, anxiety can last for a long time. It can become exhausting, debilitating and get in the way of us living our everyday lives. There are a range of effective treatments for anxiety, and you can get better

**Things to know about treatments for anxiety**

Important things to know about getting treatment for anxiety include:

* + there are lots of professionals to help you with anxiety
	+ there are also many types of treatments for anxiety, and you can get better
	+ you need a thorough check from a health professional before treatment is prescribed
	+ many people who have had anxiety have been able to seek help and live active, fulfilling lives.

Psychological therapies are the most effective way to treat and prevent the recurrence of most types of anxiety.

https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/clinical-resources/anxiety/treatment

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can be beneficial in some situations. It can alert us to dangers and help us prepare and pay attention. Anxiety disorders differ from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiousness, and involve excessive fear or anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the most common of mental disorders and affect nearly 30 percent of adults at some point in their lives. . But anxiety disorders are treatable and a number of effective treatments are available. Treatment helps most people lead normal productive lives.

How Common Are Anxiety Disorders?

In any given year the estimated percent of U.S. adults with various anxiety disorders are:

* 7 to 9 percent: specific phobia
* 7 percent: social anxiety disorder
* 2 to 3 percent: panic disorder
* 2 percent: agoraphobia
* 2 percent: generalized anxiety disorder
* 1 to 2 percent: separation anxiety disorder

Women are more likely than men to experience anxiety disorders.

Anxiety refers to anticipation of a future concern and is more associated with muscle tension and avoidance behavior.

Fear is an emotional response to an immediate threat and is more associated with a fight or flight reaction – either staying to fight or leaving to escape danger.

Anxiety disorders can cause people into try to avoid situations that trigger or worsen their symptoms. Job performance, school work and personal relationships can be affected.

In general, for a person to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, the fear or anxiety must:

* Be out of proportion to the situation or age inappropriate
* Hinder your ability to function normally

There are several types of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, specific phobias, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder and separation anxiety disorder.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder involves persistent and excessive worry that interferes with daily activities. This ongoing worry and tension may be accompanied by physical symptoms, such as restlessness, feeling on edge or easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension or problems sleeping. Often the worries focus on everyday things such as job responsibilities, family health or minor matters such as chores, car repairs, or appointments.

Panic Disorder

The core symptom of panic disorder is recurrent panic attacks, an overwhelming combination of physical and psychological distress. During an attack several of these symptoms occur in combination:

* Palpitations, pounding heart or rapid heart rate
* Sweating
* Trembling or shaking
* Feeling of shortness of breath or smothering sensations
* Chest pain
* Feeling dizzy, light-headed or faint
* Feeling of choking
* Numbness or tingling
* Chills or hot flashes
* Nausea or abdominal pains
* Feeling detached
* Fear of losing control
* Fear of dying

Because symptoms are so severe, many people who experience a panic attack may believe they are having a heart attack or other life-threatening illness and may go to a hospital ER. Panic attacks may be expected, such as a response to a feared object, or unexpected, apparently occurring for no reason. The mean age for onset of panic disorder is 22-23. Panic attacks may occur with other mental disorders such as depression or PTSD.

Phobias, Specific Phobia

A specific phobia is excessive and persistent fear of a specific object, situation or activity that is generally not harmful. Patients know their fear is excessive, but they can’t overcome it. These fears cause such distress that some people go to extreme lengths to avoid what they fear. Examples are fear of flying or fear of spiders.

Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is the fear of being in situations where escape may be difficult or embarrassing, or help might not be available in the event of panic symptoms. The fear is out of proportion to the actual situation and lasts generally six months or more and causes problems in functioning. A person with agoraphobia experiences this fear in two or more of the following situations:

* Using public transportation
* Being in open spaces
* Being in enclosed places
* Standing in line or being in a crowd
* Being outside the home alone

The individual actively avoids the situation, requires a companion or endures with intense fear or anxiety. Untreated agoraphobia can become so serious that a person may be unable to leave the house. A person can only be diagnosed with agoraphobia if the fear is intensely upsetting, or if it significantly interferes with normal daily activities.

Social Anxiety Disorder (previously called social phobia)

A person with social anxiety disorder has significant anxiety and discomfort about being embarrassed, humiliated, rejected or looked down on in social interactions. People with this disorder will try to avoid the situation or endure it with great anxiety. Common examples are extreme fear of public speaking, meeting new people or eating/drinking in public. The fear or anxiety causes problems with daily functioning and lasts at least six months.

Separation Anxiety Disorder

A person with separation anxiety disorder is excessively fearful or anxious about separation from those with whom he or she is attached. The feeling is beyond what is appropriate for the person’s age, persists (at least four weeks in children and six months in adults) and causes problems functioning. A person with separation anxiety disorder may be persistently worried about losing the person closest to him or her, may be reluctant or refuse to go out or sleep away from home or without that person, or may experience nightmares about separation. Physical symptoms of distress often develop in childhood, but symptoms can carry though adulthood.

Risk Factors

The causes of anxiety disorders are currently unknown but likely involve a combination of factors including genetic, environmental, psychological and developmental. Anxiety disorders can run in families, suggesting that a combination of genes and environmental stresses can produce the disorders.

Diagnosis and Treatment

The first step is to see your doctor to make sure there is no physical problem causing the symptoms. If an anxiety disorder is diagnosed, a mental health professional can work with you on the best treatment. Unfortunately, many people with anxiety disorders don’t seek help. They don’t realize that they have an illness that has effective treatments.

Although each anxiety disorder has unique characteristics, most respond well to two types of treatment: psychotherapy, or “talk therapy,” and medications. These treatments can be given alone or in combination. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), a type of talk therapy, can help a person learn a different way of thinking, reacting and behaving to help feel less anxious. Medications will not cure anxiety disorders, but can give significant relief from symptoms. The most commonly used medications are anti-anxiety medications (generally prescribed only for a short period of time) and antidepressants. Beta-blockers, used for heart conditions, are sometimes used to control physical symptoms of anxiety.

Self-Help, Coping, and Managing

There are a number of things people do to help cope with symptoms of anxiety disorders and make treatment more effective. Stress management techniques and meditation can be helpful. Support groups (in-person or online) can provide an opportunity to share experiences and coping strategies. Learning more about the specifics of a disorder and helping family and friends to understand better can also be helpful. Avoid caffeine, which can worsen symptoms, and check with your doctor about any medications.

Physician Review By:

Ranna Parekh, M.D., M.P.H.
January 2017

*https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/anxiety-disorders/what-are-anxiety-disorders*