

A Closer Look

Understanding Mental Illness

Anxiety Disorders

Most people experience feelings of anxiety before an important event such as a big exam, business presentation, or first date. Anxiety disorders, however, are illnesses that fill people's lives with overwhelming anxiety and fear that are chronic, unremitting, and can grow progressively worse. Tormented by panic attacks, obsessive thoughts, flashbacks of traumatic events, nightmares, or countless frightening physical symptoms, some people with anxiety disorders even become housebound. Fortunately, through research supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), there are effective treatments that can help.

How Common Are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety disorders, as a group, are the most common mental illness in America. More than 19 million American adults are affected by these debilitating illnesses each year. Children and adolescents can also develop anxiety disorders.

What Are the Different Kinds of Anxiety Disorders?

Panic Disorder— Repeated episodes of intense fear that strike often and without warning. Physical symptoms include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal distress, feelings of unreality, and fear of dying.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder— Repeated, unwanted thoughts or compulsive behaviors that seem impossible to stop or control.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder— Persistent symptoms that occur after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event such as rape or other criminal assault, war, child abuse, natural or human-caused disasters, or crashes. Nightmares, flashbacks, numbing of emotions, depression, and feeling angry, irritable or distracted and being easily startled are common. Family members of victims can also develop this disorder.

Phobias— Two major types of phobias are social phobia and specific phobia. People with social phobia have an overwhelming and disabling fear of scrutiny, embarrassment, or humiliation in social situations, which leads to avoidance of many potentially pleasurable and meaningful activities. People with specific phobia experience extreme, disabling, and irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger; the fear leads to avoidance of objects or situations and can cause people to limit their lives unnecessarily.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder— Constant, exaggerated worrisome thoughts and tension about everyday routine life events and activities, lasting at least six months. Almost always anticipating the worst even though there is little reason to expect it; accompanied by physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headache, or nausea.

What Are Effective Treatments for Anxiety Disorders?

A number of medications originally approved for treating depression have been found to be effective for anxiety disorders as well. Some of the newest of these antidepressants are called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Other anti-anxiety medications include groups of drugs called benzodiazepines and beta-blockers. If one medication is not effective, others can be tried. New medications are currently under development to treat anxiety symptoms.

Two clinically-proven effective forms of psychotherapy used to treat anxiety disorders are behavioral therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Behavioral therapy focuses on changing specific actions and uses several techniques to stop unwanted behaviors. In addition to the behavioral therapy techniques, cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches patients to understand and change their thinking patterns so they can react differently to the situations that cause them anxiety.

Do Anxiety Disorders Co-Exist with Other Physical or Mental Disorders?

It is common for an anxiety disorder to accompany depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, or another anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders can also co-exist with illnesses such as cancer or heart disease. In such instances, the accompanying disorders will also need to be treated. Before beginning any treatment, however, it is important to have a thorough medical examination to rule out other possible causes of symptoms.

Fact sheet adapted from material published by the National Institute of Mental Health.