

# ANXIETY

Anxiety is a normal human feeling. We all experience it when faced with situations we find threatening or difficult. When our anxiety is a result of a continuing problem, such as money difficulties, we call it worry, if it is a sudden response to an immediate threat, like looking over a cliff or being confronted with an angry dog, we call it fear.

Normally, both fear and anxiety can be helpful, helping us to avoid dangerous situations, making us alert and giving us the motivation to deal with problems. However, if the feelings become too strong or go for too long, they can stop us from doing the things we want to and can make our lives miserable.

## Symptoms

**In the mind:** Feeling worried all the time, Feeling tired, Unable to concentrate, Feeling irritable, Sleeping badly

**In the body:** Irregular heartbeats (palpitations), Sweating, Muscle tension and pains, Breathing heavily, Dizziness, Faintness, Indigestion, Diarrhoea

These symptoms are easily mistaken by anxious people for evidence of serious physical illness - their worry about this can make the symptoms even worse. Sudden unexpected surges of anxiety are called panic, and usually lead to the person having to quickly get out of whatever situation they happen to be in. Anxiety and panic are often accompanied by feelings of depression, when we feel glum, lose our appetite and see the future as bleak and hopeless.

## Causes

Some of us seem to be born with a tendency to be anxious - research suggests that it can be inherited through our genes. However, even people who are not naturally anxious can become anxious if they are put under enough pressure.

Sometimes it is obvious what is causing anxiety. When the problem disappears, so does the anxiety. However, there are some circumstances that are so upsetting and threatening that the anxiety they cause can go on long after the event. These are usually life threatening situations like car crashes, train crashes or fires. The people involved can feel nervous and anxious for months or years after the event, even if they have been physically unharmed. This is part of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sometimes anxiety may be caused by using street drugs like amphetamines, LSD or Ecstasy. Even the caffeine in coffee can be enough to make some of us feel uncomfortably anxious! On the other hand, it may not be clear at all why a particular person feels anxious, because it is due to a mixture of their personality, the things that have happened to them, or life-changes such as pregnancy.

## Seeking help

If we are put under a lot of pressure, we may feel anxious and fearful for much of the time. We usually cope with these feelings because we know what is causing them and we know when the situation will end. For instance, most of us will feel very anxious before taking a driving test, but we can cope because we know that the feelings will disappear once the test is over.

However, some of us have these feelings for much of the time without knowing what is causing them, and so not knowing when they might end. This is much harder to cope with and will usually need some help from somebody else.

People with anxiety and phobias may not talk about these feelings, even with family or close friends. Even so, it is usually obvious that things are not right. The sufferer will tend to look pale and tense, and may be easily startled by normal sounds such as a door-bell ringing or a car's horn. They will tend to be irritable and this can cause arguments with those close to them, especially if they do not understand why the sufferer feels that they cannot do certain things. Although friends and family can understand the distress caused by anxiety, they can find it difficult to live with, especially if the fears seem unreasonable.

### **Talking about the problem**

This can help when the anxiety comes from recent knocks, like a spouse leaving, a child becoming ill or losing a job. Who should we talk to? Try friends or relatives who you trust, whose opinions you respect, and who are good listeners. They may have had the same problem themselves, or know someone else who has. As well as having the chance to talk, we may be able to find out how other people have coped with a similar problem.

### **Self-help groups**

These are a good way of getting in touch with people with similar problems. They will be able to understand what you are going through and may be able to suggest helpful ways of coping. These groups may be focussed on anxieties and phobias, or may be made up of people who have been through similar experiences - women's groups, bereaved parent's groups, survivors of abuse groups.

### **Learning to relax**

It can be a great help to learn a special way of relaxing, to help us control our anxiety and tension. We can learn these through groups, through professionals or through books and videotapes we can use to teach ourselves. It's a good idea to practice this regularly, not just when we are in a crisis.

### **Psychotherapy**

This is a more intensive talking treatment which can help us to understand and to come to terms with reasons for our anxieties that we may not have recognised ourselves. The treatment can take place in groups or individually and is usually weekly for several weeks or months.

If this is not enough, there are several different kinds of professionals who may be able to help - the family doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, nurse or counsellor.

### **Medication**

Drugs can play a part in the treatment of some people with anxiety or phobias. The most common *tranquillisers* are the valium-like drugs, the benzodiazepines (most sleeping tablets also belong to this class of drugs). They are very effective at relieving anxiety, but we now know that they can be addictive after only four weeks regular use. When people try to stop taking them they may experience unpleasant withdrawal symptoms which can go on for some time. These drugs should be only used for short periods, perhaps to help during a crisis. They should not be used for longer-term treatment of anxiety.

*Antidepressants* can help to relieve anxiety as well as the depression for which they are usually prescribed. Some even seem to have a particular effect on individual types of anxiety. One of the draw-backs is that they usually take 2 to 4 weeks to work and some can cause nausea, drowsiness, dizziness, dry mouth and constipation. Taking a certain kind of antidepressant, the MAOIs, may mean that you have to stick to a special diet.

*Beta blockers* are usually used to treat high blood pressure. In low doses, they control the physical shaking of anxiety and can be taken shortly before meeting people or before speaking in public.

### **Useful contacts:**

[www.socialanxietyireland.ie](http://www.socialanxietyireland.ie) , tel. 01 8032855  
<http://mentalhealthireland.ie> tel. 01 2841166