What Is Anxiety and How Do You Treat It?

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What Is Anxiety?

What is anxiety seems like a very broad question, but it is an important one to answer in order to gain a better understanding of what anxiety is itself. Anxiety, in its most basic definition, is not debilitating, nor is it negative.

Anxiety is actually the human body's natural reaction to stress and stressful situations. When it is experienced occasionally, it is a very normal part of life.

If you have ever felt fear or apprehension – especially concerning the future – you've experienced anxiety. Many people will experience these feelings when dealing with particularly stressful situations, like a job interview, moving to another city or country, the first day of school, or making a presentation to a large group of people.

Although anxiety is a normal response to certain situations, it should be a feeling that comes and goes throughout your life. However, when feelings of anxiousness are so extreme that they begin to interfere with your daily life is when anxiety becomes a problem–and a problem which needs to be managed.

What Is an Anxiety Disorder?

Anxiety disorders are often diagnosed when an individual experiences anxiety for longer than six months. Although women are more likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, the truth is that anyone can be affected at any age.

As someone with an anxiety disorder, you may frequently feel intense, excessive and persistent worry or fear. These feelings may arise due to everyday situations or even thoughts about the future and make it difficult to live your life day to day.

If left untreated, anxiety will often get worse, eventually stopping you from doing the things that you enjoy or even venturing out your front door. Anxiety disorders are actually the most common form of emotional disorder and have a comorbidity with depression and substance abuse.

Symptoms often vary between anxiety disorders, but some of the most common symptoms of anxiety include:

- Feelings of nervousness, restlessness, or tension
- Sensing impending danger or doom
- Breathing rapidly, or hyperventilation
- Sweating
- Increased heart rate
- Trouble concentrating or focusing on anything
- Difficulties sleeping
- Trembling and shaking

- Feeling weak, tired, or fatigued
- Avoidance or isolation (often to avoid triggers)
- Difficulty controlling worry
- Gastrointestinal issues
- Changes in appetite (increase or decrease)

In many instances, individuals with anxiety disorders also experience occasional or frequent panic attacks as one of their symptoms.

What Is a Panic Attack?

Many individuals with an anxiety disorder will also experience panic attacks at some point during their lives. Panic attacks often happen without any warning and can occur at any time, even during sleep.

An individual experiencing a panic attack will have an episode of sudden intense anxiety and fear, or even sheer terror. These feelings reach a peak within minutes and often cause sufferers to believe that they are having a heart attack.

More often than not, the extreme anxiety or panic experienced by a person having a panic attack is completely disproportionate to the actual situation. In some cases, the panic attack may be unrelated to what is happening in reality.

What is confusing for many individuals who experience panic attacks is trying to determine the cause, when there may be no logical answer to discover.

Next page: The symptoms of a panic attack, the different types of anxiety disorders, and what causes anxiety?

What Are the Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

Many people who experience panic attacks report all or some of the following symptoms:

- Heart palpitations
- Feeling weak, faint, or dizzy
- Numbness or tingling in the hands and fingers
- Feelings of fear and terror
- A sense of impending doom or death
- Chest pains
- Difficulty breathing
- Sweating and/or having chills
- Feeling a loss of control

Panic attacks often subside just as quickly as they are brought on, usually lasting no more than 10 minutes at a time. Some symptoms may persist for a longer time, but the worst is over fairly soon.

Those who have experienced panic attacks in the past are at a greater risk for subsequent panic attacks, as compared to those who have no experience with them. If panic attacks occur frequently enough, an individual may have a panic disorder.

Understanding What a Panic Disorder Is

For those with panic disorder, panic attacks occur so often that they experience a persistent fear of when the next one will come. Since panic attacks come on suddenly and with little to no warning, this leaves the person in a constant state of anxiety, as they cannot predict when the next episode will happen or what will trigger it.

Symptoms of panic disorder are often first seen in early adulthood, with women being twice as likely as men to develop the disorder.

Although it is unclear what causes panic disorder, some speculate that there may be a biological component to one's vulnerability to panic attacks. Some individuals begin to associate panic attacks with major life changes or lifestyle stressors, as it is during these times that panic attacks will often occur.

There has also been evidence that points to the possibility of panic disorder running in families. Like many other anxiety disorders, those who have panic disorder are more likely than others to also have depression, suicidal thoughts or attempts, or substance abuse issues.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

In addition to panic disorder, there are other anxiety disorders that negatively affect an individual's ability to live their everyday life. In some cases, multiple anxiety disorders can be diagnosed within the same individual.

Some of the more common types of anxiety disorders include, but are not limited to:

- Social anxiety disorder, or social phobia
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD
- Hypochondriasis
- Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD
- Agoraphobia
- Separation anxiety disorder
- Selective phobias

No matter what form of anxiety you may have, treatment can help. If your anxiety is interfering with your ability to work, go to school, maintain relationships, or another important aspect of your life, you can benefit from some form of anxiety treatment.

What Causes Anxiety?

The causes of anxiety are not entirely understood, although it is believed that life experiences – especially traumatic events – appear to trigger anxiety disorders within people who are prone to anxiety in the first place.

There are a number of risk factors that will increase your chances of developing an anxiety disorder, but none of these risks will guarantee its onset.

Risk Factors for Anxiety

Trauma, whether experienced or witnessed as a child or an adult, has a strong correlation with anxiety and will put you at a much higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder.

Stress plays a large role in the onset of anxiety disorders in many different ways.

If you have another, unrelated, serious health condition, the constant stress of dealing with that condition can trigger anxiety. The stress surrounding one large and important life event may be enough to trigger anxiety, just as the slow buildup of many smaller stressors can result in an anxiety disorder.

For some, **anxiety disorders run in the family**, making blood relatives more susceptible to anxiety themselves. Those who have other mental health disorders also have a higher risk of developing anxiety.

Others may simply have **a personality type that lends itself to anxiety disorders**, while some people can cause or worsen their anxiety with drug or alcohol abuse.

Next page: Anxiety as a symptom of a medical condition, what anxiety is like, and treatment for anxiety.

Anxiety as a Symptom of a Medical Condition

In some cases, anxiety may also have roots in other underlying health issues or medical causes. Anxiety can actually be a sign or symptom of another medical condition altogether.

Some medical issues that are closely correlated with anxiety include:

- Chronic pain
- Thyroid problems
- Heart disease
- Drug abuse or withdrawal
- Diabetes
- Withdrawal from alcohol or anti-anxiety medications (especially benzodiazepines)
- Respiratory disorders (like asthma or COPD – chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)
- Irritable bowel syndrome

In some cases, anxiety may also be one of the side-effects listed on certain medications, whether related to the conditions above or not.

If there are no members of your immediate family who have an anxiety disorder and you never struggled with anxiety as a child, it is likely that your anxiety may be attributed to another health condition altogether.

If your anxiety was seemingly brought on with no rhyme or reason – as in, there was no triggering event or reason behind its sudden appearance – it may be helpful to speak to your doctor about your overall health and what may be causing your anxiety.

What Is Anxiety Like?

Most individuals have a unique experience when it comes to anxiety, due to the array of disorders that fall under the general umbrella term of “anxiety”. However, there are some common elements between many anxiety disorders that many people can relate to.

A large number of people who experience anxiety feel like their mind is racing or swirling, making it extremely difficult to concentrate or grab a hold of any singular thought. This sense of confusion may last a few minutes, hours, or even days, depending on the person and their current experience.

Going along with these thoughts and feelings is often an elevated heart rate, rapid breathing and shortness of breath, as well as a sense of restlessness or agitation. It is common for someone with anxiety to fidget a lot, due to the increase of adrenaline in their system in response to their anxiousness.

As a result of these symptoms, many people with anxiety also have trouble falling or staying asleep, due to their inability to quiet the seemingly constant noise within their own minds. Many will also experience nightmares or painful thoughts and memories that cannot be controlled.

Anxiety also has a physical effect on many people, with many attributing headaches, migraines, stomach pains, cramps, loss of appetite, irritable bowels, fatigue, and much more on their anxiety disorder.

Treatment of Anxiety Disorders

The treatment of anxiety is largely dependent on which anxiety disorder you’ve been diagnosed with, but there are many proven methods that work for many people.

Most often, medication is used in combination with psychotherapy to achieve results.

Talk Therapy for Anxiety

Talk therapy can help individuals with anxiety disorders to find solutions to anxiety symptoms and a way to build understanding about their anxiety triggers.

In this type of therapy, people with anxiety are typically assigned or referred to a therapist to work one-on-one – creating a safe, calm, private and trusting environment – allowing the individual to open up on their own terms.

This is why talk therapy for anxiety is extremely effective, talk therapy sessions allow a person to discuss their emotions, troubles, and fears without having to feel feelings of being judged or misunderstood.

Popular types of talk therapies include:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Bereavement counseling
- Cognitive analytic therapy
- Interpersonal therapy
- Psychoanalysis

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Anxiety

Cognitive behavioral therapy – often referred to as CBT – is a common therapy used in the treatment of anxiety disorders, as it teaches you skills to gradually improve your symptoms.

The goal of CBT is for those with anxiety to learn to cope with their symptoms in a way that eventually allows them to return to the activities they were avoiding due to anxiety.

CBT may also encompass exposure therapy, which slowly introduces individuals to the object or situation that triggers anxiety, in the hopes of building confidence and managing anxiety in the midst of such triggers.

If CBT doesn't interest you, you may also try another different talk therapy.

Taking Medication for Anxiety

There are a number of medication options for the treatment of anxiety, all of which require a prescription from a doctor. Most medications take at least six to eight weeks before they become fully effective.

There are five main categories of medications that are used in the treatment of anxiety, which include:

- Antidepressants
- Benzodiazepines
- Beta-blockers
- Buspirone
- Hydroxyzine

There are a variety of medication options within each of these categories, with the most common medications used for anxiety being two types of antidepressants: selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs).

Although medication is effective in the treatment of anxiety for many people, many doctors recommend using more than one approach at a time when coping with anxiety disorders.

The multi-faceted approach that combines the use of medication with psychotherapy and exercise is often seen

as the best way to treat a variety of anxiety disorders. Although some people will respond to one method alone, using a combination approach will more consistently produce positive results.

How to Overcome Anxiety Naturally, Without Medication

If you don’t want to take medications for anxiety, there are natural ways that you can manage and cope with your anxiety.

While therapy and exercise are of the utmost importance, you may use herbs and supplements, meditation or mindfulness as strategies to cope and manage life with anxiety.

Stay Active, Eat Well and Drink Water

Keeping active, eating well, drinking plenty of water, and getting six to eight hours of sleep every night should be something that everyone strives for. You should not take these things lightly if you have anxiety, as these habits form the basis of your overall physical and mental health.

Use Herbs and Supplements

On top of this, there are some herbs and supplements that are known to be natural remedies for anxiety. Two of the most widely accepted in the treatment of anxiety are kava and valerian.

Kava root is commonly used for relaxation, but studies have been inconclusive in proving its effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety disorders.

Valerian is often used to induce sedation, with some studies suggesting that it is helpful in treating insomnia, but no proof of its effectiveness against anxiety.

Practice Meditation, Mindfulness or Yoga

There are numerous studies that evaluate the effectiveness of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness for reducing of anxiety and panic episodes.

Yoga, meditation, and mindfulness can help you focus on the things that are surrounding you and stop worrying about all the little things that might happen. Through meditation and mindfulness, you can find the balance in stressful situations and take a look at yourself from a distance.

For example, you can use practicing specific yoga poses – like the child's pose – as a posture to rest and regroup during times of stress and regroup. While for meditation, you can either meditate in quiet or you can search for a guided meditation audio on YouTube or audio streaming services.

If meditation or yoga can't fit into your schedule, you can practice some deep breathing exercises and these can be done at any time. For example, many new fitness smartwatches have a "relaxing breathing" option where you can select from a 5-minute to 10-minute deep breathing exercise.

The Bottom Line...

No matter what treatment options you are interested in – traditional or natural – it is always a good idea to check in with your doctor or therapist and keep them informed throughout your anxiety treatment journey.

These professionals are there to help you by answering questions or offering other suggestions to help you manage and cope with your anxiety better.