

Do You Have an Anxiety Disorder?

It's the most common form of mental illness today

By Jean Jeffers, Staff Writer

Edward is awake at 3 a.m. — again. He has startled his wife with his thrashing about in bed; he is trembling uncontrollably. He also develops chest pain each time he has an episode like this.

Edward needs to see his doctor — he may have an anxiety disorder. “Anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness seen today, replacing major depression as the No. 1 diagnosis,” said Daniel Watson, M.S.W., L.I.S.W., an individual, marital and family psychotherapist.

Watson says everyone feels fear and anxiety at times, especially if there is a precipitating cause. Most individuals who are anxious feel

this way only a few days, and that is normal. Anxiety becomes a problem, Watson says, when it interferes with one's life, such as being able to participate in daily activities, and when functioning is impaired.

There are several major types of anxiety. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), these include:

- Generalized anxiety disorder — the patient characteristically has reoccurring fears and worries, primarily about health or finances, and a persistent expectation that something bad is about to happen.

- Panic disorder — this usually involves sudden, unprovoked feelings of intense terror and dread.

- Phobias — these are intense fears about certain objects, such as animals, or situations, such as getting into an elevator.

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder — usually characterized by excessive, unwanted and persistent thoughts or ruminations (obsessions) and routines or rituals (compulsions) in which the person engages to try to rid himself or herself of the persistent thoughts.

- Post-traumatic stress disorder — characterized by certain thoughts that remind the person of a traumatic event that usually happened years before.

Diagnosing the type of anxiety a patient has and then determining the best form of treatment is the task of the mental health professional. Working with a mental health specialist is essential to a patient's recovery. Most cases of anxiety disorder can be treated effectively by mental health professionals, says the APA. A combination of psychotherapy and medication(s) is generally recommended.

One approach to treating anxiety is behavioral modification. It involves training patients in using relaxation and deep-breathing exercises. These particularly help with the agitation and rapid, shallow

breathing that often accompany an anxiety disorder.

Another important aspect of treatment is cognitive therapy. Patients learn to understand how their thoughts contribute to the symptoms of anxiety disorder and how to change these thoughts to reduce the likelihood of occurrence and the intensity of the reaction, says the APA.

Along with psychotherapy, certain medications are often prescribed. For some types of anxiety, a powerful group of anti-anxiety medications are used along with anti-depressants. It is important to understand that all drugs have side effects. Finding the right dosage and/or combination of drugs may take some time, and the patient may need to be monitored closely by a mental health professional.

The APA says most patients who suffer from anxiety disorders are able to reduce or eliminate their anxiety symptoms and return to normal functioning after several months of psychotherapy and drug therapy. Cooperation is critical to success. Faithfully taking the medications and keeping appointments with a mental health professional are also part of the recovery process.



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