Mental Health

Anxiety Disorder

The term “anxiety disorder” is actually a blanket description for several different, but related, types of mental illnesses that are characterized by unusually strong fear and anxiety. These illnesses include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and separation anxiety disorder.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is the most common form of anxiety disorder among adults. It is marked by persistent worry and anxiety about everyday things. The symptoms may include several of the following:

- Excessive, ongoing worry and tension
- An unrealistic view of problems
- Restlessness or feeling “edgy”
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Sweating
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nausea
- The need to go to the bathroom frequently
- Tiredness
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Trembling
- Being easily startled

Panic Disorder

The general day-to-day symptoms of panic disorder may be quite similar to generalized anxiety

disorder. People with a panic disorder also experience something call panic attacks, which involve an attack that can be momentary or last for several minutes where a person is overwhelmed with terror. Other symptoms can include:

- Sweating
- Feeling nauseous or having an upset stomach
- Dizziness and shaking
- Feeling numb or having a tingling sensation
- A feeling of intense fear, terror, or anxiety
- Difficulty breathing or very rapid breathing
- Chest pain or tightness
- A racing or irregular heartbeat

People with a panic disorder may also experience:

- Repeated panic attacks when there is no reason to feel terrified
- Changing of regular daily activities out of the fear of another panic attack

Phobias

Phobias are irrational or semi-irrational fears, such as an overwhelming terror about heights or being in enclosed spaces. These fears share similar symptoms to generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder. There are two specific other types of phobias: agoraphobia and social anxiety disorder.

Agoraphobia, specifically, is the fear of not having an escape from embarrassing or emotionally difficult situations, often involving other people. People with agoraphobia often have panic attacks, and it is closely related to panic disorder. In extreme cases, people with agoraphobia can become so afraid of the tasks of daily living, such as driving or going to the grocery store or work, that they may have difficulty leaving the house.

Social Anxiety Disorder

Similar to agoraphobia, people with social anxiety disorder have overly fearful responses to interactions with other people. Sometimes the phobia is specific to speaking in groups or in public, while at other times the anxiety occurs whenever a person has to interact with others. People with social anxiety disorder may experience the same symptoms of panic disorder when having to deal with other people, and as a result may end up socially isolated.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

People with obsessive compulsive disorder have both repetitive obsessions (about doing particular

activities, being in certain situations or having intrusive thoughts) accompanied by ritualized compulsive behavior in reaction to those obsessions (such as washing hands, cleaning house and checking locks). Sometimes the compulsive behavior is triggered by nothing other than feeling nervous. The anxiety resulting from being unable to complete a compulsive behavior can be extreme and may be similar to panic disorder.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

People with post-traumatic stress disorder, also known as PTSD, typically have recurring feelings of panic that are initially caused by an extremely stressful situation, such as combat or physical assault, that can later be triggered by other incidents, such as a loud noise. People with PTSD often also have depression. In addition, PTSD can be caused by long-term exposure to repeated and extremely stressful events. For more on PTSD, click here.

Separation Anxiety Disorder

People with separation anxiety disorder have an unusually extreme emotional reaction to being separated from a person or place. Symptoms of these reactions are similar to panic attacks.

How is anxiety treated?

The two main treatments for anxiety are psychotherapy and medications.

Psychotherapy, which is also known as talk therapy, involves working with a therapist to reduce your anxiety symptoms. The most effective form of psychotherapy for anxiety disorders is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT focuses on teaching specific skills to improve symptoms and gradually return to the activities avoided because of anxiety.

There are also several types of medications used to help relieve symptoms, such as antidepressants and buspirone, an anti-anxiety med.

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