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What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and essential part of all our lives.

Anxiety can motivate achievement, push us to run faster in a race, to play better in a competition, to think more quickly in an exam. Anxiety also mobilizes us to deal with threatening situations. It is not possible or even desirable to eliminate anxiety and worry from our lives. Life would be dull and dangerous without it.

Anxiety is a physiological response to a perceived threat or danger. When we feel unsafe or uncomfortable, we experience heightened arousal, alertness and physical tension. Symptoms of anxiety may include:

- Tense muscles, discomfort, unease, fidgeting , restlessness, tics, twitching , trembling.
- Headaches.
- Irritability, aggression and anger.
- Mind racing with worrying thoughts.
- Sleep disturbance and disturbing dreams.
- Breathlessness and over-breathing.
- Sweating, flushing and blushing .
- Palpitations and racing heartbeat.
- Needing frequent trips to the toilet.
- Nausea and light-headedness.
- A sense of depersonalization and unreality .
- A desire to avoid or get away from the situation.

We may start to restrict our lives in an attempt to avoid potentially uncomfortable situations. Anxious thoughts disrupt our concentration and we may feel overwhelmed particularly when we are under pressure to perform.

Some people cling to friends and constantly seek reassurance when they feel anxious; others withdraw and become isolated. These responses can be difficult for those around us to understand. Sometimes we may not even recognize that we are anxious and may attribute these symptoms to other causes.

Anxiety is very common. About 9% of the general population was identified as suffering from a clearly identified anxiety disorder. A survey of university students found raised levels of anxiety among students, particularly around exams and coursework deadlines.

If anxious thoughts and feelings become particularly intense, messages to the brain can trigger a chain of automatic physiological reactions, which prepare us to fight, run away or hide from danger. This is known as the fight, flight or freeze response. Unfortunately these physiological responses are not helpful when we are sitting in an exam room, socializing or about to do a presentation. If the fight / flight / freeze response is triggered when there is no actual danger to act upon, this may lead to a panic attack.

PANIC ATTACKS

During a panic attack:

- Breathing becomes faster, causing hyperventilation.
- An excess of oxygen is inhaled, making us feel light-headed and faint.
- The heart beats faster, pumping blood to the muscles in preparation for action and producing a tingling sensation in hands and feet.
- Sweating increases.
- The body lightens the load for action by emptying the bladder and bowels.
- The urge to get out of the situation as quickly as possible becomes overwhelming.
- We may respond angrily if anything gets in our way.

These symptoms can be frightening and bizarre and people often fear they are having a heart attack or going mad. In reality, this is a normal healthy protective mechanism that is being switched on at the wrong time.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

If we interpret a situation or event as a threat to our emotional or physical well being, then we will experience anxiety. These anxieties generally stem from some underlying fear of failure or of being rejected.

Worry and anxiety can become a habit that is hard to break and we may become anxious about feeling anxious. If our general level of anxiety becomes constantly raised, our alarm system may trigger more frequent panic attacks.

On the other hand, some people enjoy exams and large social gatherings; some people like spiders and even pay to go bungee jumping. It is not the situation itself, but the way we think about it that makes us feel anxious or worried. This gives us a useful clue to learning to control our anxiety.

How can you help yourself?

- Accepting a degree of anxiety as normal, functional and harmless will reduce your fears and help you to regain control. Talking to your GP or a counselor and finding out more information is likely to be useful.
- If you experience a raised level of anxiety most of the time, find out what helps you to wind down and set time aside to relax on a regular basis.
- Regular exercise, such as walking or swimming, boosts serotonin levels and increases your sense of wellbeing. If you are feeling anxious, a short, brisk walk is likely to help.
- If you tend to be a worrier or if something is troubling you, find someone to discuss it with. A different perspective can help you develop a more objective way of thinking and to escape the loop of anxious rumination.
- You may experience anxiety in specific situations or in response to particular thoughts and feelings. Understanding what triggers your anxiety may help you to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and to develop problem-solving strategies.
- If you are avoiding a situation where you feel particularly anxious, you may consider developing a plan to desensitize yourself to this situation, step by step, perhaps with the support of a friend.
- Medication may be helpful in coping with a crisis or reducing intense anxiety for a short period to allow you to develop some coping strategies. See your GP if you think this might help.

- Try to resist the temptation to cope with anxiety or sleep disturbance by using alcohol, drugs or tobacco. These may provide temporary relief but they do not resolve the problem and are likely to make things worse. Drugs that depress the central nervous system, such as alcohol, have a rebound effect as they wear off and result in jittery feelings and more anxiety .
- Cut out or cut down on stimulants such as coffee, tea and drinks that contain caffeine and sugar. Stimulant drugs such as amphetamines, tobacco and ecstasy , cause side effects similar to anxiety and are unhelpful.
- If we start to panic, our thoughts and feelings feed the fear . We can prolong, or shorten a panic attack by what we think and the things we say to ourselves. If we understand that a panic attack is a normal, though unpleasant, process that will soon pass, we can reassure and calm ourselves.
- Breathing quickly and taking in excess oxygen creates unpleasant symptoms. Slowing down your breathing and not taking big gulps of air will help immediately .
- Cupping your hands over nose and mouth as you breathe will also help to restore the oxygen/carbon dioxide balance and will have a calming effect.
- If you are having difficulties with your studies or exams, speak to your professors to let them know . They may be able to help. For example, arrangements can be made to take exams in an alternative environment if a large exam room presents problems.
- There are many people in the campus to whom you can turn for support. Get in touch with the appropriate specialist or Counselors for help.

How can you help someone else?

- If you think a friend, or someone you know, may be suffering from anxiety, you can offer support and a listening ear.
- Encouraging them to balance work and relaxation and to take breaks from working may be valuable.
- Do not encourage them to use alcohol or drugs to relax or forget their problems. These may bring temporary relief, but they will not resolve the problem and may make it worse.
- There are limits to what you can do and you need to take care of yourself. It may be that a hostel mate or friend becomes particularly anxious at a time when you are also struggling with coursework or exams. Sometimes demands for constant reassurance may become exhausting for you and provide no real relief for your friend. It may be that they need specialist help or you may need some support or advice yourself. If you are concerned about a friend, or someone who is having problems, then do not hesitate to contact the appropriate specialist on campus.

When is specialist help appropriate?

Sometimes, self-help combined with practical and emotional support from friends and family may enable you to manage your anxiety. If, however, you feel anxious or uncomfortable talking about personal issues with those around you, or if you feel too overwhelmed by anxiety to take the first steps to regaining control, there are a number of resources on campus where you will find information, advice, treatment or support.

Approach the appropriate specialist or Counselor on campus whenever necessary. Depending on the nature of the difficulty, different approaches may be suggested:

- At times of acute crises, medication can be helpful in reducing symptoms and allowing you to regain control
- If you experience panic attacks, specific techniques may help you to learn to cope
- If anxiety is a problem, counseling may help you to understand the nature of your difficulty, to learn how to manage the symptoms and to address the thoughts and feelings that create and maintain anxiety
- Where a specific phobia is causing difficulty, you may benefit from learning to cope directly with the situation rather than restricting your activities in order to avoid it.