

Changing Minds

Anxiety

THIS LEAFLET HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO MAKE YOU THINK TWICE ABOUT HOW YOU VIEW PEOPLE WHO SUFFER FROM ANXIETY

The campaign to increase the understanding of mental health problems and reduce their [stigma] and discrimination.

The world is a frightening place. When you are a child and surrounded by noise and giants you stay close to the person who looks after you. Wherever she is, that place is safe. As you go further away, you check that she is there.

When you go out on your own you take the feelings of being safe with you. You can move about the world despite its dangers. As adults we form new relationships – with friends, lovers, children. We get into routines – of work, play and relaxation. These are our habits, our people. If we go close to the edge, for excitement or by accident, we know we'll be all right because we have got our habits, our people.

Anxiety's a bit like excitement. It is a lot like fear. It is a feeling you get when the person who looks after you suddenly isn't there. The safety net has gone.

This feeling can come on in all sorts of different situations. A person who is under stress may find that she has more and more physical symptoms. She may get headaches, chest pains, feelings of tiredness and tension. She may fear that she is physically ill, that she is going to drop dead of a heart attack. But in fact she is just doing too much. She needs to slow down, relax, take some of the worry from her life. Some people experience real fear in the most unlikely places. Sometimes even when just sitting at home he may find that his heart is pounding, he is sweating, unable to get his breathe and terrified that something dreadful is going to happen. Other times something dreadful has happened. For example, the person may have seen violent death first hand. She may be unable to get the image of it out of her head. She may awake petrified from nightmares. She may be irritable, jumpy, cold and distant with her loved ones. Anxiety appears in many forms. Whenever it comes on, whatever it is called, it is fear. It may seem ridiculous that a person cannot even walk to the end of his road but that is the power of fear. It may be out of proportion but it is paralysing.

It doesn't have to be forever. Anxiety in all forms can be treated.

1. Anxiety

Eighty years ago this man's grandfather was called a coward. Today he's called a hero. They both came under fire on enemy lines. Both were changed men afterwards. They couldn't sleep, they had nightmares, they were jumpy and irritable. Both were distant from their wives and children.

Eighty years ago soldiers like that were said to have shell-shock. Today it's called post-traumatic stress disorder. It's not only soldiers who get it. A woman who has been raped. A teenager who has been mugged. They may get flashbacks. They may avoid anything to do with what happened.

Life doesn't change. Our understanding of it does. Let us understand more and condemn less.

2. Anxiety

65,000 years ago this woman's ancestors survived on the plains of Africa. One of the things that helped them was feeling anxious. Some things never change.

Anxiety has a purpose. It makes us more alert, more aware, more ready for action. When we feel wound up we can either attack or run away. That's very useful in the jungle. And a little bit can help on a Saturday morning in the supermarket. Too much and you've got to run away. That's called panic.

The person suffering a panic attack feels as if something dreadful is going to happen. Her heart pounds, she can't catch her breath. She feels all hot and dizzy and light-headed. It takes a lot of courage even to go shopping if you think you're going to die.

3. Anxiety

Four months ago this woman wasn't here. She was stuck at home. She hadn't been out for years. She could move her arms and legs. She had no trouble with her chest. In fact she looked perfectly all right. Her children couldn't understand it. And when they had to do everything for her, they thought she was having them on.

In fact she had agoraphobia. That means that she didn't go out. She didn't go out because she felt frightened. At first she just felt panicky at the bus-stop. So she stopped taking the bus. Then she felt scared in the town. So she just went to her local shop. Then even the thought of that was terrifying. So she never went out again.

Until now that is. Someone helped her. They went up her road together and then into town. It took a long time and a lot of effort. But look where she is now.

4. Anxiety

Tomorrow this man isn't going to think about work at all. He's had six months of learning how to forget about it.

Sometimes we think about things more than we'd like to. We worry – about work, about bills, about our friends or families. If a thought keeps coming to mind, if we can't shut it out, if it is there so much that we can't stand it, then we are obsessed.

The thing about obsession is that you can't stop it. At least you feel you can't. It's out of your control. It's driving you mad. You are frightened that something awful is going to happen.

Something you can do nothing about. In the end you are so afraid of doing something wrong that you can't do anything at all.

Now he's coming back to work. His boss is delighted. At least he will have his mind on the job.

5. Anxiety

Three hundred years ago this woman would have been burnt at the stake. Now she doesn't even know she's practising magic. But she spends her days doing spells.

She touches each corner of her front door three times ... three times. She turns the gas off three times ... three times. And when she says goodnight to her cat she says 'sleep tight, sleep tight, sleep tight' as many times as there are hours in the night. Once she tried not to do it and she didn't sleep a wink. She was terrified that she had killed her cat. She was compelled to count to keep him safe.

We often say we just had to do something – like buy that jacket or have that second cake.

Most of the time it's just an excuse. But feeling compelled is not just an excuse. Sometimes it isn't – then it's a compulsion. Then it's a matter of life and death - until you can break the spell.

FACTS ABOUT ANXIETY

What is an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety disorders may cause people a number of different physical and psychological problems. Some people suffer from anxiety all of the time – this is called generalised anxiety. For people suffering from panic attacks, the symptoms of anxiety are likely to come out of the blue. Another sort of anxiety disorder is called a phobia, in which people have problems in certain situations.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is another form of severe anxiety. The psychological symptoms of anxiety include feelings of dread and irritability, and increased muscle tension and activity of the nervous system. This leads to a variety of physical symptoms such as dry mouth, shortness of breath, dizziness and trembling.

Anyone can have feelings of anxiety. These may occur in response to a stressful situation. Sometimes these feelings can be helpful, for example, by increasing a person's ability to perform in a race. These feelings are normal. Only when the symptoms are more intense or long-lasting do they interfere with a person's concentration and ability to do routine tasks. People may avoid situations that could provoke feelings of anxiety. This interference with daily living as much as the symptoms themselves may lead a person to seek help.

Who suffers from anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders are quite common, affecting 5 per cent of the population at any one time, but many people do not seek help. More women than men are affected. Anxiety disorders often start in the 20s but may begin earlier. Sometimes they occur in older people.

What causes anxiety disorders?

The cause is not always clear. Anxiety disorders are more common in some families, suggesting that genetic factors may be important. These disorders may also develop as a result of emotional or social problems, occasionally starting after a stressful or frightening event. One theory is that some of these problems are caused by 'faulty' thinking. For instance, an exaggerated fear that physical symptoms (such as palpitations) together with the feeling of anxiety, will lead to a medical emergency. Someone having these palpitations and feeling his heart beating a little fast may believe that he is going to have a heart attack. This may lead to increasing levels of anxiety, and even more palpitations.

What treatment is available?

The aim of any treatment is to try and help someone to reduce their symptoms of anxiety to an acceptable level, so that the anxiety no longer interferes with day-to-day living.

Health professionals can help by giving a clear explanation of the symptoms. The doctor may point out that physical and psychological feelings are closely related. For example, breathlessness or dizziness can occur in anyone feeling under stress, and do not necessarily mean that there is a serious disease in the rest of the body.

Health professionals may also encourage a person to try and identify any social or emotional problems. There are various ways of trying to deal with these, but one helpful approach can be to use problem-

solving techniques. These can be complex or as simple as listing the problems and selecting one for action. Different approaches are then looked at, their pros and cons reviewed, and finally the best course of action chosen. Problem solving can be a self-help technique or may form part of a course of therapy sessions, either on a one-to-one basis or in an anxiety management group. It also naturally forms part of relationship based psychotherapy that can sometimes be helpful.

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Other approaches to managing anxiety include cognitive and behavioural therapy techniques and relaxation. Sometimes it can be helpful for a friend or relative to get involved in the treatment, perhaps attending some of the therapy sessions and learning about the disorder, and helping with any homework between sessions.

Occasionally a doctor will prescribe an antidepressant in combination with non-drug treatments. These drugs can help lower levels of anxiety.

Doctors sometimes use minor tranquillisers. These also lower levels of anxiety but are prescribed with caution because of the risk of long-term dependence.

The person with anxiety can help himself by learning how to relax, to do things he enjoys and by

taking exercise. By learning about his symptoms, he can understand that they are not life-threatening, and this can help.

What can society do?

Public education can help us to have a better understanding of the nature of anxiety disorders. With this understanding should come increased tolerance. We need to recognise that severe anxiety disorders can cause much personal distress and interfere with daily living. People with this disorder and their families need support in seeking help and getting treatment.

Self-help Organisations

Anxiety UK

Zion CRC
339 Stretford Road
Hulme, Manchester M15 4ZY
Tel: 08444 775 774
National membership organisation
providing help and advice for sufferers,
their carers and families.

Further reading

Living with Fear (2005)
Isaac Marks, McGraw Hill
The Feeling Good Handbook (2000) David
Burns, Penguin Books.
Anxiety: Your Questions Answered (2003)
Trevor Turner, Churchill Livingstone.

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Please note that we are unable to offer advice on individual cases.