

# Anxiety and Panic Disorders

DON'T FORGET

**Achievement is built on challenge**

## What is an anxiety disorder?

We all feel nervous or worried sometimes. Often, such feelings serve as warning signals about a particular issue and they can motivate us to take action to avoid a problem. Like adults, most teenagers also have periods of worry and anxiety in their lives, and these are usually connected to current events in their lives, such as exams or going to a new school etc. These worries and anxieties disappear once the stressful or worrying event has passed.

However, some people experience unexpected or unhelpful anxieties that are intense, and which occur without any current external cause. Such anxiety can seriously impact their lives, including how they think, feel, and act, going on to cause difficulties with academic work, social interactions, sleep and family life. This kind of anxiety requires medical intervention and treatment.

Anxiety disorders are often 'comorbid' with depression. This means that a person suffers both conditions simultaneously and that they interact (a person has anxiety about their depression, or gets depressed about being anxious). Treatments for anxiety disorders can therefore be quite similar to those for depression. Anxiety disorders can also be present simultaneously with each other.

The most common anxiety disorders are:

- i. Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterised by excessive worry and/or apprehension about a number of everyday events, activities or minor problems for more than six months. These feelings occur almost all the time and are not triggered by any one specific issue. Rather, the worry seems to float in a more generalised way, from one topic to the next. The condition may be accompanied by physical symptoms like muscle tension and sleep problems.

- ii.** Panic Disorder is characterised by discrete and intense periods of anxiety that occur unexpectedly, without warning, and are not always linked to a specific place or situation. With panic disorder, there is often no warning, and therefore it is harder to predict when it may occur. The person has a feeling of sudden and intense fear that lasts for a short period of time, and also experiences physical symptoms like shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, or nausea. People who experience panic disorder often find themselves trapped in a cycle of worry: they fear more panic attacks and may worry that something bad will happen as a result of the panic attack. Some people change their routine to avoid triggering more panic attacks.
- iii.** Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD): Nowadays it is common for people to say things like “I’m a bit OCD” if they have a strong preference for things being neat and orderly. Often, the term is used jokingly, but the fact that you have preference for something does not really mean you suffer from OCD. Rather OCD is a condition in which a person experiences unwanted thoughts, images, or urges that cause anxiety (obsessions) or repeated actions meant to reduce that anxiety or make the distress feel better (compulsions). Obsessions or compulsions usually take a lot of time and cause a lot of distress.
- iv.** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an intense re-experiencing of a traumatic event through distressing recollections, dreams, and/or associations. Some examples of the cause of PTSD include serious accidents, witnessing or being the victim of violence, and being a victim or witness of abuse.
- v.** Social Anxiety is the fear of social situations that involve interaction with other people and the fear of being negatively judged and evaluated by other people. It is a pervasive disorder and can cause anxiety and fear in most areas of a person’s life. Being shy or awkward does not necessarily mean that you suffer from social anxiety. Rather, the intensity of the fear and the extreme lengths that a person will go to avoid social interaction are what characterise social anxiety.
- vi.** Phobias. A phobia is an intense fear around a specific thing like an object, animal, or situation that is, in fact, relatively safe. Most of us are scared of something, but these feelings don’t disrupt our lives. With phobias, the thought of facing the object or situation they fear often brings on a panic attack or severe anxiety. People who suffer from phobias change the way they live in order to avoid the feared object or situation. They are aware that their fear is irrational, but they still experience it. Phobias usually begin in adolescence or adulthood. They start suddenly and tend to be more persistent than childhood phobias. No one knows what causes them or why they persist in some people but disappear in others.

## Common signs of anxiety disorders in young people

Some of the common signs of anxiety disorders in young people are:

- › Feeling constantly agitated, tense, restless or unable to stop or control worrying – the young person might seem unable to relax
- › Seeming highly sensitive to criticism or extremely self-conscious or uncomfortable in social situations
- › Always expecting the worst to happen or seeming to worry too much or in a way that is out of proportion to problems or situations
- › Avoiding difficult or new situations, or having difficulty facing new challenges
- › Being withdrawn or extremely shy, or avoiding social activities completely
- › Feeling that s/he must do a particular action
- › Having obsessive thoughts or images that they say they can't get out of their head

### Treatments for anxiety disorders

In general, the help of mental health practitioners should be sought when anxiety is having a significant detrimental effect on a person's ability to live a relatively normal life. It is important to maintain open communication about anxiety, as this can help to relieve the symptoms. Treatment can be initiated with a visit to the GP, who may refer you to a specialist.

Anxiety disorders can be treated with counselling, psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). These three are sometimes referred to as 'talking therapies.' Sometimes medication may be prescribed to deal with the most intense, short-term spells of anxiety (attacks). However, it is usually recommended that the use of these medications by adolescents should be restricted to the most severe kinds of anxiety and carefully monitored because of the dangers of dependence.

### Mood disorders

Mood disorders are a group of mental illnesses that affect how you feel and think about yourself, other people and life in general. People with mood disorders find that their general emotional state or mood is distorted or inconsistent with their circumstances and interferes with their ability to function. They may be extremely sad, empty or irritable (depressed), or they may have periods of depression alternating with being excessively happy (mania). There are a few different types of mood disorders, and these include:

REMEMBER

However bad a situation is  
**know that it will change**