

ANXIETY DISORDER FACT SHEET

What are anxiety disorders?

Everyone knows what it's like to feel anxious-the "butterflies " in your stomach before that first date, the "jitters" before giving a speech, the sweaty palms or racing heartbeat that often accompany challenging or dangerous situations. These feelings are normal. But what if you were to find yourself feeling anxious most of the time instead of just under specific circumstances? What if you couldn't even find a particular reason for feeling this way? What if you found yourself avoiding certain everyday routines or activities altogether in an effort to curb the stressful feelings they cause? What if you simply were to become "paralyzed" by your own nervousness? This is what life is often like for those suffering from anxiety disorders.

What are the different types of anxiety disorders?

Panic Disorder

Those suffering from panic disorder experience reoccurring and unexpected panic attacks-instances of extreme fear or discomfort that start abruptly. Panic attacks are characterized by physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, the sensation of choking, chest pain, nausea, dizziness, disorientation, fear of losing control or dying, numbness, chills, and hot flashes.

Panic disorder is diagnosed more often in women than in men and, although the age of onset varies considerably, is most commonly experienced for the first time between late adolescence and the mid-30's.

Phobias

Defined as exaggerated, involuntary, and irrational fears of particular situations or things.

Specific phobia is brought about by a specific object or situation such as flying, heights, needles, or snakes. Specific phobias are generally more common in women and usually first appear during childhood.

Social phobia (social anxiety disorder) is limited specifically to social situations. This particular phobia is typified by extreme fear of

meeting new people and of being embarrassed, humiliated, or judged by others. Usually first appearing in the mid-teens, social phobia sometimes arises from a history of childhood shyness.

Agoraphobia

Those with agoraphobia have an intense fear of being trapped in particular places or situations or of not being able to find help if they experience a panic attack. Fears often center on being alone in an open area or being in a large crowd. Often, those with agoraphobia avoid such situations altogether. *It is important to remember that diagnosed phobias cause severe impairment--everyone has certain fears and experiences times of shyness and anxiety.*

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

OCD is characterized by persistently intrusive and inappropriate thoughts, impulses, or images that run through one's mind (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors that one feels they must do (compulsions). Common obsessions include fear of contamination, fixation on lucky or unlucky numbers, fear of danger to oneself or others, need for order or exactness, and excessive doubt. The most common compulsions performed include ritualistic hand washing, counting, checking, hoarding, and arranging. OCD is considered to occur when these obsessions and compulsions are experienced for more than an hour each day in a way that interferes with one's life or causes great anxiety. Generally, the disorder first begins in adolescence or early adulthood, although it may start in childhood.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Personally experiencing or witnessing a violent or tragic event that resulted in feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror, can sometimes cause PTSD. Events that often lead to the development of this anxiety disorder include rape, war, natural disasters, abuse, and serious accidents. While it is common to experience a brief state of anxiety or depression after such occurrences, those with PTSD continually re-experience the traumatic event through ways such as nightmares, hallucinations, or flashbacks; avoid all things associated with the event; and exhibit difficulty sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, extreme alertness, and/or jumpiness. PTSD usually appears within three months of the traumatic experience, but in some circumstances can surface months or even year later.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Individuals with GAD experience excessive anxiety and worry about several everyday events or activities. The anxiety is difficult to control and causes notable complications in daily work and social setting. Physical symptoms of the disorder include edginess, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbances. To be diagnosed with GAD, one must experience this excessive anxiety for the majority of days during a period of six months or longer.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses in the United States. These serious brain disorders are estimated to affect more than 20 million Americans (approximately one in nine) every year. Those with anxiety disorders also frequently suffer from depression, substance-related disorders, and/or eating disorders. It is estimated that over half of those diagnosed with panic disorder or OCD have depression too.

The most common medications used to treat anxiety disorders are antidepressants and benzodiazepines.

The forms of talk therapy most often effective in treating anxiety disorders are behavioral therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Behavioral therapy involves relaxation techniques and gradual exposure to the thing or situation that causes the anxiety in an attempt to reduce that anxiety. Cognitive-behavioral therapy works on helping individuals react differently to what causes them anxiety by changing their thinking patterns.

Fact sheet courtesy of Valeo Behavioral Health Care - Topeka, Kansas.