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Introduction

It's normal to feel some amount of anxiety under times of difficulty or stress. Some amount of anxiety serves as a helpful function. It is our body's way of responding to danger and triggers a 'fight or flight' response that helps keep us safe and alive. We often worry about things that are present in our lives, such as finances, work, and family, and this worry has the potential to help us make good decisions in these areas.

Anxiety is problematic when it is constant or overwhelming when you are troubled by fears or your daily life is affected by feelings of worry, dread or apprehension. Anxiety can stop you from doing things, going places, interfering with your relationships, preventing you from enjoying life or you can use substances or other distractions to help manage your anxiety then it's time to seek professional help.

What is anxiety?

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines anxiety as "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. Knowing the difference between normal feelings of anxiety and an anxiety disorder requiring medical attention can help a person identify and treat the condition.

Of all existing psychological and mental maladies, anxiety disorders are the most common affecting over 30% of all adults in the United States. Anxiety disorders are a broad category that includes many different manifestations of anxiety including:

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD): Excessive anxiety or worry about array things such as personal health, work, social interactions, and everyday routine life circumstances. It is the most common and is characterised by persistent, excessive worrying about everyday events and activities which the person finds difficult to control.

Specific phobia: An intense fear or aversion to specific situations, things or places that is out of proportion to the actual danger caused by the situation or object.

Social anxiety: Excessive worry about actions or behaviors in social or performance situations and a fear of feeling embarrassed causes those with social anxiety to avoid social situations—gatherings, parties or events—leading to a kind of self-imposed isolation.

Panic disorder: Episodes of intense fear that come on quickly and reach their peak within minutes. Attacks can occur unexpectedly or can be brought on by anxiety or a trigger, such as a feared object or situation

While most people worry about everyday things such as family, work pressures, health, or money, worrying about these kinds of things does not typically get in the way of everyday functioning. However, people with GAD find that their worry is excessive (they worry more about a situation or scenario than others do or “blow things out of proportion”), difficult to control, and pervasive (the worry begins about a specific event but then extends to all similar or related events). GAD often results in occupational, social, and physical impairment, as well as emotional distress.

GAD tends to develop gradually and fluctuate in severity over time. Although most people appear to be symptomatic for the majority of the time since the onset of the disorder, about one-quarter of people with GAD exhibit periods of remission.

Signs and causes of anxiety

Signs:

- you can have excessive worrying that lasts for months;
- you can have feelings restless, keyed up, or on edge;
- being easily tired and irritable.
- you can have difficulty concentrating, or have your mind go blank.
- Have difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or having restless, unsatisfying sleep.

Being anxious, tense, fearful when threatened is normal and helpful, as the anxiety increases the ability to flee or fight the threat. People who inherit or develop a nervous temperament see the ordinary world as threatening and, if they do not learn to cope, will react to minor threats as if they were major. Hence the persistent and pervasive worrying. Anxiety may be caused by a mental condition, a physical condition, the effects of drugs, or a combination of these.

Generally, the exact causes of anxiety disorders are unknown. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, researchers believe that a combination of genetic and environmental factors may play a role. Brain chemistry is also being studied as a possible cause. The areas of your brain that control your fear response may be involved.

Anxiety disorders often occur alongside other mental health conditions, such as substance abuse and depression. Many people try to ease the symptoms of anxiety by using alcohol or other drugs. The relief these substances provide is temporary. Alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and other drugs can make an anxiety disorder worse.

Effective ways to deal with anxiety

Become a relaxation expert. We all think we know how to relax. But chilling out in front of the TV or computer isn't true relaxation. (Depending on what you're watching or doing, it could even make you **tenser**.) The same is true for alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. They may seem to relieve anxiety or stress, but it's a false state of relaxation that's only temporary. What the body really needs is daily practice of a relaxation technique — like deep breathing, tai chi, or yoga — that has a physical effect on the mind. For example, deep breathing helps to relax a major nerve that runs from the diaphragm to the brain, sending a message to the entire body to let go and loosen up.

Get enough sleep, nourishment, and exercise. Want your mind and body to feel peaceful and strong enough to handle life's ups and downs? Get the right amount of sleep for your needs — not too much or too little. Eat well: Choose fruit, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains for long-term energy (instead of the short bursts that come from too much sugar or caffeine). And exercise to send oxygen to every cell in the body so your brain and body can operate at their best.

You can use the muscle relaxation technique. Using relaxation exercises can be an effective way to reduce your stress and anxiety. Alternate between tensing and relaxing different muscle groups throughout the body. Tensing your muscles is a common symptom of anxiety and by learning to immediately relax those muscles you'll program your body to relax when it feels the tension.

Connect with other people. Spend time with friends or family. Organized activities are great, but just hanging out works too. Doing things with those we feel close to deepens our bonds, allowing us to feel supported and secure. And the fun and sharing that go with it allow us to feel happier about things. If you feel worried or nervous about something, talking about it with someone who listens and cares can help you feel more understood and better able to cope. You'll be reminded that everyone has these feelings sometimes. You're not alone.

Connect with nature. Heading out for a walk in the park or a hike in the woods can help anyone feel peaceful and grounded. Walking, hiking, trail biking, or snowshoeing offer the additional benefit of exercise. You can invite a friend or two — or a family member — along and enjoy feeling connected to people as well.

Take a moment to center yourself and bring yourself back into the present moment. Pay attention to the good things. A great way to keep our minds off the worry track is to focus our thoughts on things that are good, beautiful, and positive. Appreciate the small, everyday blessings. Allow yourself to dream, wish, and imagine the best that could happen. Tune into 4 things around you that you can see, 3 things that you can touch, 2 things that you can smell, and 1 thing that you can taste. You will distract yourself from the anxiety that is trying to take over your body.

Talking to someone you trust about what's making you anxious could be a relief. It may be that just having someone listen to you and show they care can help in itself. If you aren't able to open up to someone close to you, we have in our country run helplines that you can call to talk to someone.

You can keep a diary. It might help to make a note of what happens when you get anxious or have a panic attack. This could help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you, or notice early signs that they are beginning to happen.

You could also make a note of what's going well. Living with anxiety can mean you think a lot about things that worry you or are hard to do. It's important to be kind to yourself and notice the good things too.

Conclusion

Most people are familiar with experiencing some anxiety from time-to-time. However, chronic anxiety can be a sign of a diagnosable anxiety disorder.

When anxiety affects one's relationships, work performance, and other areas of life, there is potential that these anxious feelings are actually an indication of mental health illness.

If you are experiencing anxiety and panic symptoms, you need to talk with your doctor or other professionals who treat panic disorder. They will be able to address any concerns you have, provide information on diagnosis, and discuss your treatment options.

Sources

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