

person has an anxiety disorder in combination with another disorder (such as ADD or depression), treatment may be more complicated and take longer.

While a treatment plan must be specifically designed for each individual, there are a number of standard approaches. Mental health professionals who specialize in treating anxiety most often use a combination of the following treatments (there is no single correct approach):

Cognitive Therapy. The patient learns how to identify and change unproductive thought patterns by observing his or her feelings and learning to separate realistic from unrealistic thoughts.

Behavior Therapy. This treatment helps the patient alter and control unwanted behavior.

Systematic Desensitization. A type of behavior therapy, this is often used to help people with phobias, OCD, and agoraphobia. The patient is exposed to anxiety-producing stimuli one small step at a time, thereby gradually increasing his or her tolerance to situations that have produced disabling anxiety.

Relaxation Training. Many children and adolescents with anxiety disorders benefit from self-hypnosis, guided visualization, and biofeedback. Relaxation training is often part of psychotherapy.

Medication. Antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications can help restore chemical imbalances that cause symptoms of anxiety. This is an effective treatment for many children and adolescents, especially in combination with psychotherapy.

The treatment for an anxiety disorder depends on the severity and duration of the problem. The patient's willingness to actively participate in treatment is also an important factor. When a child or adolescent with panic is motivated to try new behaviors and practice new skills and techniques, he or she can learn to change the way the brain responds to familiar thoughts and feelings that have previously caused anxiety.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Anxiety Disorders Association of America
(www.adaa.org)

Anxiety Network (www.anxietynetwork.com)

Anxiety Panic Internet Resource (TAPIR)
(www.algy.com)

Free self-help for people with anxiety disorders
(www.Anxieties.com)

Beck, Aaron, Emery, Gary, and Greenberg, Ruth. *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective*. New York: Basic Books, 1990.

Freeman, Arthur, and DeWolf, Rose. *Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda: Overcoming Regrets, Mistakes, and Missed Opportunities*. New York: Harperperennial Library, 1992.

SEE THESE HANDOUTS ON RELATED TOPICS

Depression in Children and Teens

How to Build Your Child's Self-Esteem

Phobias

How to Cope When Parenting Seems Overwhelming

Separation Anxiety

Social Anxiety Disorder (Shyness)

When Kids Don't Want to Go to School



Anxiety in Children

INTRODUCTION

Every human feels anxiety on occasion; it is a part of life. All of us know what it is like to feel worry, nervousness, fear, and concern. This is true for adults and children alike. Kids feel nervous on their first day at school or when they have to take a test. We all know it's normal to feel a surge of fear when we unexpectedly see a photo of a snake or look down from the top of a tall building. Most of us manage these kinds of anxious feelings fairly well and are able to carry on with our lives without much difficulty. They don't disrupt our lives.

But millions of people (an estimated 15 percent of the population) suffer from devastating and constant anxiety that severely affects their lives, sometimes forcing them to live in highly restricted ways. Many of these victims are children. They experience panic attacks, phobias, extreme shyness, obsessive thoughts, and compulsive behaviors. The feeling of anxiety is a constant and dominating force that disrupts their lives. Some become prisoners in their own homes, unable to leave to go to school or visit the mall. For these children, anxiety is much more than just an occasional wave of apprehension.





WHAT IS ANXIETY?

An estimated 15 percent of the U.S. population suffers from devastating and constant anxiety, including panic attacks, phobias, extreme shyness, obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors.

An anxiety disorder affects a child's behavior, thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. The most common anxiety disorders include the following:

Social anxiety also called social phobia. This is a fear of being around other people. Children who suffer from social anxiety always feel self-conscious around others. They always have the feeling that everyone is watching and staring at them and being critical in some way. Because the anxiety is so painful, they learn to stay away from social situations and avoid other people. Some eventually need to be alone at all times, in a room with the door closed. The feeling is pervasive and constant and even happens with people they know.

COMMON PANIC SYMPTOMS

- Racing or pounding heart
- Trembling
- Sweaty palms
- Feelings of terror
- Chest pains or heaviness in the chest
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Fear of dying
- Fear of going crazy
- Fear of losing control
- Feeling unable to catch one's breath
- Tingling in the hands, feet, legs, arms

Older children and adolescents who have social anxiety know that their thoughts and fears are not rational. They are aware that others are not actually judging or evaluating them at every moment. But this knowledge does not make the feelings disappear.

Panic disorder. This is a condition where a person has panic attacks without warning. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 5 percent of the adult American population suffers from panic attacks. Some experts say that this number is actually higher, since many people experience panic attacks but never receive treatment.

A panic attack typically lasts several minutes and is extremely upsetting and frightening. In some cases, panic attacks last longer than a few minutes or strike several times in a short time period.

A panic attack is often followed by feelings of depression and helplessness. Most people who have experienced panic say that the greatest fear is that the panic attack will happen again.

Many times, the person who has a panic attack doesn't know what caused it. It seems to have come "out of the blue." At other times, people report that they were feeling extreme stress or had encountered difficult times and weren't surprised that they had a panic attack.

Generalized anxiety disorder. Quite common, generalized anxiety disorder affects an estimated 3 to 4 percent of the population. This disorder fills a child's life with worry, anxiety, and fear. Children and adolescents who have this disorder are always thinking and dwelling on the "what ifs" of a situation. It feels like there is no way out of the vicious cycle of anxiety and worry. The person often becomes depressed about life and his or her inability to stop worrying.

Children and adolescents who have generalized anxiety usually do not avoid situations, and they don't generally have panic attacks. They can become incapacitated by an inability to shut the mind off and are overcome with feelings of worry, dread, lack of energy, and a loss of interest in life. The person usually realizes these feel-

ings are irrational, but the feelings are also very real. The person's mood can change from hour to hour, or even day to day. Feelings of anxiety and mood swings become a pattern that severely disrupts the victim's quality of life.

Children and adults with generalized anxiety disorder often have physical symptoms including headaches, irritability, frustration, trembling, inability to concentrate, and sleep disturbances. They may also have symptoms of social phobia and panic disorder.



WHAT ARE THE OTHER TYPES OF ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Other types of anxiety disorders include:

- Phobia—fearing a specific object or situation
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—a system of ritualized behaviors or obsessions that are driven by anxious thoughts
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—severe anxiety that is triggered by memories of a past traumatic experience
- Agoraphobia—disabling fear that prevents one from leaving home or other safe places



HOW IS ANXIETY TREATED?

The treatment for an anxiety disorder depends on the severity and length of the problem. The child's willingness to actively participate in treatment is also an important factor.

Most children and adolescents who suffer from anxiety disorders begin to feel better when they receive the proper treatment. It can be difficult to identify the correct treatment, however, because each person's anxiety is caused by a unique set of factors. It can be frustrating for the patient when treatment is not immediately successful or takes longer than hoped for. Some patients feel better after a few weeks or months of treatment, while others may need a year or more. If a