

Group #1: Anxiety Disorders (Fact Sheet)

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a state of constant physical, emotional and cognitive hyper-arousal. It is sometimes confused with the stress response (see Module 6) and the term is often incorrectly used to describe how one feels when faces with a challenging or dangerous situation. The word to describe that sensation is “fear”.

When people say that they are anxious they constantly feel upset, uncomfortable and tense and may experience many physical symptoms such as stomach upset, shaking and headaches.

It is essential to differentiate the expected stress response symptoms to normal or casual life challenges from Anxiety Disorders. Sometimes the language used confuses the two. For example, the phrase “examination anxiety” can be interpreted to mean an Anxiety Disorder caused by exposure to an examination. This is not correct. The phrase “examination induced stress response” conveys a more useful explanation of the phenomenon being described.

What are Anxiety Disorders?

The Anxiety Disorders are a group of illnesses, each characterized by persistent feelings of intense anxiety. There are continuous feelings of extreme discomfort and tension, and may include panic attacks. This anxiety exists in and of itself, it does not arise as a result of a change in the person’s environment. However, the symptoms of anxiety found in an Anxiety Disorder can be increased or intensified in stress-provoking situations.

People are likely to be diagnosed with an Anxiety Disorder when their level of anxiety symptoms or feelings of panic are so extreme that they significantly interfere with daily life and stop them from doing what they want to do.

Anxiety Disorders affect the way the person thinks, feels and behaves and, if not treated, can cause considerable suffering and life difficulties. They often begin in adolescence or early adulthood. People with an Anxiety Disorder also usually show much more anxiety when faced with an everyday environmental challenge compared to a person without an Anxiety Disorder.

Anxiety Disorders are common and may affect one in twenty people at any given time.

Anxiety Disorders: What are the Main Types of Anxiety Disorders?

All Anxiety Disorders are disturbances of the brain’s signaling functions and are characterized by heightened every day symptoms of anxiety or panic as well as significant problems in everyday life.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

People with this disorder worry constantly about themselves or their loved ones, financial disaster, their health, work or personal relationships. These people experience continuous apprehension and often suffer from many physical symptoms such as headache, diarrhea, stomach pains and heart palpitations.

MODULE 3C

Activity #4 Handout

Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is fear of being in places or situations from which it may be difficult or embarrassing to get away, or a fear that help might be unavailable in the event of having a panic attack.

People with agoraphobia most commonly experience fear in a cluster of situations: in supermarkets and department stores, crowded places of all kinds, confined spaces, public transport, elevators, highways, etc.

People experiencing agoraphobia may find comfort in the company of a safe person or object. This may be a spouse, friend, pet or medicine carried with them.

The onset of agoraphobia is common between the ages of 15 and 20, and is often associated with Panic Disorder or Social Anxiety Disorder.

Panic Disorder (With or Without Agoraphobia)

People with this disorder experience panic attacks in situations where most people would not be afraid such as: at home, walking in the park or going to a movie. These attacks occur “out of the blue”, come on rapidly (over a few minutes) and go away slowly. Usually they last about 10-15 minutes.

The attacks are accompanied by all of the unpleasant physical symptoms of anxiety, plus a fear that the attack may lead to a total loss of control or death.

It is because of this that some people start to experience a fear of going to places where panic attacks may occur and of being in places where help is not at hand. In addition to panic attacks and agoraphobia symptoms, people with panic disorder also worry about having another panic attack.

Phobias

Everyone has some mild irrational fears, but phobias are intense fears about particular objects or situations which interfere with our lives or harm us. These might include fear of heights, water, dogs, closed spaces snakes or spiders.

Someone with a phobia is fine when the feared object is not present. However, when faced with the feared object or situation, the person can become highly fearful and even experience a panic attack.

People affected by phobias can go to great lengths to avoid situations which would force them to confront the object or situation which they fear.

Social Anxiety Disorder

People with Social Anxiety Disorder worry that others will judge everything they do in a negative way and they feel easily embarrassed in most social situations. They believe they may be considered to be flawed or worthless if any sign of poor performance is detected.

They cope by either trying to do everything perfectly, limiting what they are doing in front of others (especially eating, drinking, speaking or writing) or withdrawing gradually from contact with others. They will often experience panic symptoms in social situations and will avoid many situations where they feel observed by others (such as: in stores, movie theatres, public speaking and social events).

Anxiety Disorders are among the most common of the mental illnesses. About 5% of people can be expected to experience an Anxiety Disorder during their adolescent years.

For more information on some Anxiety Disorders, check out:

www.teenmentalhealth.org/product/tmh-speaks-social-anxiety/

www.teenmentalhealth.org/product/tmh-speaks-panic-disorder/

What Causes Anxiety Disorders?

The causes of each disorder may vary, and it is not always easy to determine the causes in every case. All Anxiety Disorders are associated with abnormalities in the brain signaling mechanisms that are involved in the creation and expression of the stress response.

Personality

People with certain personality characteristics may be more prone to Anxiety Disorders. Those who are easily upset are very sensitive, emotional or avoidant of others may be more likely to develop Anxiety Disorders.

Learned Response

Some people exposed to situations, people or objects that are upsetting or anxiety-producing may develop an anxiety response when faced with the same situation, person or object again, or become anxious when thinking about the situation, person or object. This is not likely to lead to an Anxiety Disorder.

Heredity

The tendency to develop Anxiety Disorders has a genetic basis and runs in families.

Avoidance

This is a common behavioural response in people who have an Anxiety Disorder. Unfortunately, avoidance can make the symptoms of anxiety worse in the long run.

How Can Anxiety Disorders be Treated?

If they are not effectively treated, Anxiety Disorders may interfere significantly with a person's thinking and behaviour. This can cause considerable suffering and distress. Some Anxiety Disorders may precede Depression or Substance Abuse and in such cases treatment may help to prevent these problems.

Many professionals such as family doctors, psychologists, social workers, counselors or psychiatrists can help people deal with Anxiety Disorders.

Treatment will often include education and specific types of psychotherapy (such as cognitive behavioural therapy) to help the person understand their thoughts, emotions and behaviour. People develop new ways of thinking about their anxiety and how to deal more effectively with feelings of anxiety.

Medication is sometimes used to help the person control their high anxiety levels, panic attacks or Depression.

The Benzodiazepines (such as diazepam) are used for the temporary relief of anxiety, but care has to be taken with their use as these medications may occasionally cause difficulties in some people.

Antidepressants play an important role in the treatment of some Anxiety Disorders, as well as associated or underlying depression. Contrary to the belief of some, antidepressants are not addictive.

MODULE 3C

Activity #4 Activity Sheet

Group #1: Understanding Anxiety Disorders (Reporting Page)

What are Anxiety Disorders?

How common are Anxiety Disorders?

Describe some of the symptoms of Anxiety Disorders:

List and briefly explain some of the main types of Anxiety Disorders:

What type of treatment is available for people experiencing Anxiety Disorders?

What other kinds of support can help people with Anxiety Disorders recover?