

FACTS ABOUT ANXIETY DISORDERS

Most people experience feelings of anxiety before an important event such as a big exam, business presentation or first date. Anxiety disorders, however, are illnesses that cause people to feel frightened, distressed, and uneasy for no apparent reason. Left untreated, these disorders can dramatically reduce productivity and significantly diminish an individual's quality of life. Fortunately, through research conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), there are effective treatments that can help. NIMH is conducting a national education campaign to increase awareness of these disorders and their treatments.

HOW COMMON ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

- ◆ Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses in America: more than 23 million are affected by these debilitating illnesses each year.
- ◆ Anxiety disorders cost the U.S. an estimated \$46.6 billion in 1990 in direct and indirect costs, nearly 1/3 of the nation's total mental health bill of \$148 billion.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Generalized Anxiety Disorder- Chronic, excessive worry about everyday routine events and activities, for at least six months; almost always anticipating the worst even though there is little reason to expect it. Accompanied by physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headache or nausea.

Panic Disorder - Characterized by panic attacks, sudden feelings of terror that strike repeatedly and without warning. Physical symptoms include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal discomfort, feelings of unreality, and fear of dying. Concern and apprehension over the occurrence of future panic attacks.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder – Repeated, intrusive and unwanted thoughts or rituals that seem impossible to control.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Persistent symptoms that occur after experiencing a traumatic event such as war, rape, child abuse, natural disasters, or being taken hostage. Nightmares, flashbacks, numbing of emotions, depression, and feeling angry, irritable, distracted, and being easily startled are common.

Phobia - Extreme, disabling and irrational fear of something that really poses little or no actual danger; the fear leads to avoidance of objects or situations and can cause people to limit their lives.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Treatments have been largely developed through research conducted by NIMH and other research institutions. They are extremely effective and often combine medication and specific types of psychotherapy.

More medications are available than ever before to effectively treat anxiety disorders. These include antidepressants, benzodiazepines, and buspirone. If one medication is not effective, others can be tried. New medications are currently under development to treat anxiety disorders.

The two most effective forms of psychotherapy used to treat anxiety disorders are behavioral therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Behavioral therapy tries to change actions through techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing or through gradual exposure to what is frightening. In addition to these techniques, cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches patients to understand their thinking patterns so they can react differently to the situations that cause them anxiety.

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR ANXIETY DISORDERS TO COEXIST WITH OTHER PHYSICAL OR PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS?

It is common for an anxiety disorder to accompany another anxiety disorder, or in some cases depression, eating disorders or substance abuse. Anxiety disorders can also coexist with physical disorders. In such instances, these disorders will also need to be treated. Before undergoing any treatment, it is important to have a thorough medical exam to rule out other possible causes.

For more information about anxiety disorders, contact: The Anxiety Disorders Education Program, National Institute of Mental Health, Room 7-99, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857; telephone (301) 443-4356. Publications and other information are also available online for NIMH's home page: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>.