

What is Anxiety? What causes Anxiety? What to do about it.

Anxiety affects our whole being. It affects how we feel, how we behave and has very real physical symptoms.

It feels a bit like fear but whereas we know what we are frightened of, we often don't know what we are anxious about. Mild anxiety is vague and unsettling - severe anxiety can be extremely debilitating.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is often triggered by stress in our lives. Some of us are more vulnerable to anxiety than others, but even those who become anxious easily can learn to manage it well. We can also make ourselves anxious with "negative self-talk" - a habit of always telling ourselves the worst will happen.

How will I recognize anxiety?

As well as feeling apprehensive and worried (possibly without knowing why), you may experience some of the following physical symptoms:

- Tense muscles
- Trembling
- Churning stomach
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Headache
- Backache
- Heart palpitations
- Numbness or "pins and needles" in arms, hands or legs
- Sweating/flushing

It is easy to mistake symptoms of anxiety for physical illness and become worried that you might be suffering a heart attack or stroke. This of course increases anxiety.

When is anxiety a problem?

We all become anxious from time to time. It becomes a problem when it interferes with life in the absence of real threat, or goes on too long after the danger has past.

What if I just avoid things that make me anxious?

Avoiding situations that make you anxious might help you feel better in the short term. The trouble is the anxiety keeps returning, and has a habit of spreading to other situations. This can lead to you avoiding things like shops, crowded places, lectures or tutorials. So although avoidance makes you feel better -

- Relief is only temporary - you may worry about what will happen next time.
- Every time you avoid something it is harder next time you try to face it.
- Gradually you want to avoid more and more things.

OK, so what else can I do to feel better?

- **Learn to manage stress in your life.** Keep an eye on pressures and deadlines and make a commitment to taking time out from study or work.
- **Learn a variety of relaxation techniques.** Physical relaxation methods and meditation techniques really do help. We have some relaxation tapes at Student Counselling that will help you get started. Health food shops also sell a variety of relaxation tapes.
- **Look after your physical self.** Eat healthily, get regular exercise and try to keep a regular sleep pattern. Avoid alcohol, cannabis and junk food.
- **Practise deep abdominal breathing.** This consists of breathing in deeply and slowly through your nose, taking the air right down to your abdomen. Visualise the air travelling right down to your abdomen and say the word "calm" to yourself as you breathe in. Then breathe out slowly and gently through your mouth. As you breathe out visualise the stress and tension leaving your body with your breath and think the word "relax." Deliberately let your muscles go floppy as you breathe out. Take three deep breaths at a time. If you breathe deeply for too long you may feel dizzy from the extra oxygen. You can repeat the three breaths after a short time of breathing normally.
- **Learn to replace "negative self talk" with "coping self talk."** When you catch yourself thinking something negative like "I can't do this, it's just too hard," try to change it to something more positive, like "This is hard but I can get through it." It can be helpful to think of "changing the tape" that runs through your mind. It is useful to make a list of the negative thoughts you often have and write a list of positive, believable thoughts to replace them.

Anxiety can be exhausting and debilitating. Don't suffer alone for too long. It often helps to talk to a Counsellor or Psychologist, who can help you find ways to deal with stress in your life and teach you skills to manage anxiety.

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