

FACT SHEET

Anxiety Disorders and Phobias

What is an anxiety disorder?

Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in his or her life. People become anxious when they have to face a highly stressful situation like taking a test, going for a job interview or getting married. When one is anxious and under stress, the body reacts; hands become clammy, the heart beats a little faster; one can even feel lightheaded or dizzy. Some people become preoccupied with fear and worry, and the intense feelings of anxiety continue. If this happens, an individual may have an anxiety disorder.

One in six Canadians is affected by an anxiety disorder. Anxiety can take the form of panic disorder, phobia or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Without treatment an individual's physical, mental and emotional health may be in jeopardy. Anxiety disorders can also lead to alcohol and/or drug abuse, family problems, depression, and in some cases, suicide.

What is panic disorder?

On average, 1 out of 3 young adults reports having had a panic attack in the last year. During a panic attack, sensations such as sweating, nausea, trembling and numbness in the legs or hands, dizziness, hot or cold flashes, a feeling of tightness or pressure in the chest, hyperventilation, "jelly" legs or blurred vision can develop. Individuals may even feel like they are going to die of a heart attack or lose control of their body functions. These intense feelings of panic usually do not last for very long and most people brush off the episode as a momentary "freak out." Some people become very agitated, however and develop a fear of it happening again. If an individual has more than four panic attacks within a month or a panic attack occurs when the individual is not in an anxious or stressful situation, it is probable that the individual has a panic disorder. Individuals who are susceptible to panic attacks are more likely to be concerned with illness, death or losing control. Panic disorders usually begin before the individual is 20-30 years old.

What is obsessive compulsive disorder?

People with obsessive compulsive disorder experience unwanted thoughts that make no sense but nevertheless cause the individual to feel anxious. Irrational thoughts may concern contaminating themselves or others with dirt or germs, or they may be obsessed about their own safety or the safety of a loved one. In response to their obsessive thoughts, individuals may need to think neutralizing thoughts or to perform certain compulsive rituals, including repetitive hand washing or counting. As with phobias, a traumatic event can trigger obsessive thoughts or behaviour. People who are described as perfectionists however seem more prone than others to develop obsessions. If untreated, this condition can result in severe impairment in many psychological areas as well as affect relationships and life at school or work.

What are phobias?

A phobia is an irrational and uncontrollable fear of an object or a situation. It is unclear how phobias start, but if an individual is prone to excessive anxiety and stress, he or she is more likely to be vulnerable to panic attacks and phobias. People with phobias experience feelings of intense panic when confronted by whatever it is that frightens them and go to considerable lengths to avoid the object or situation. An individual with a phobia may experience the physical feelings of panic when confronted with the feared situation. Types of phobias are:

- **Agoraphobia:** Agoraphobia is fear of fear itself. Individuals develop agoraphobia out of the fear of a panic attack occurring in any situation where help is unavailable or escape difficult. People with agoraphobia associate places or feelings as the cause of their panic attacks so they try to avoid the place and/or situation that they think is the cause. People with agoraphobia become highly dependent. This can be exhausting and frustrating for family members and friends. People with agoraphobia may confine themselves to their homes, become very worried about their health, abuse alcohol or become suicidal. The rate of attempted suicide for people with agoraphobia is about 20%. Agoraphobia and depression are closely related.
- **Social Phobia:** People with social phobias have had life experiences that render them hypersensitive to criticism and rejection. They have difficulty starting a conversation, asking questions, making friends or joining groups. The anxiety produced by a social phobia can be so intense that it provokes blushing, stammering, sweating, stomach upsets, a racing heart, trembling limbs or trigger a full-scale panic attack. Social phobias are one of the most common psychiatric disorders, which may be associated with other conditions like depression, specific phobias (fear of spiders, heights, water, etc.) and agoraphobia.
- **Specific Phobia:** People with a specific phobia experience anxiety only when confronted with the thing they most fear. Common fears are thunderstorms, heights and certain animals like snakes and spiders. Of all the anxiety disorders, specific phobias are the most responsive to therapy.

Other forms of anxiety disorder

- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:** PTSD is an anxiety reaction to a real or life-threatening, traumatic event (e.g., a car accident, rape or war). Individuals with PTSD may also suffer from nightmares and insomnia, flashbacks, hyper-vigilance (always being on alert), irrational outbursts of anger and depression.
- **Generalized Anxiety:** People with generalized anxiety disorder often worry excessively about things that, to others, seem illogical. Their bodies also react to an ongoing state of tension and anxiety. They may experience tightness and pain in their muscles, lack of concentration, shakiness, insomnia, irritability and irritable feelings.

What are the treatments for anxiety disorders and phobias?

There has been a lot of progress in the understanding and diagnosis of the various forms of anxiety disorders. Treatment is specific to the severity of the disorder. The most effective forms of therapy are based on cognitive and behavioural approaches. Individuals may also learn calming techniques and meditative therapy and anti-depressant medication can be prescribed to help their anxiety. In most cases therapy will help the individual get better and lead a productive life.

Where can I get help?

If you or a loved one appears to be suffering from an anxiety disorder or phobia, you should contact your family physician. Remember, you are not alone. You will be taking a major step toward recovery when you begin to seek help. For more information, contact the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, toll-free at 1-800-875-6213 or visit www.ontario.cmha.ca.