

WHAT ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

We all have anxiety but sometimes it gets out of hand. *Many* people need help dealing with the amount of anxiety in their life.

The human central nervous system is designed with a built-in alarm system – a bit like a house alarm. It is designed to send PANIC signals whenever there is a clear danger. This system that we all have is sometimes called **the flight-fight response** – it is the way adrenaline and other chemicals kick in and get the body ready to flee from danger or to fight a predator. There are several ways, though, that this system seems to get triggered when there is no actual threat or danger. It's like 'the house alarm' goes off in response to a small puff of wind or just randomly. And after it has gone off once, it is primed to do it repeatedly.

Read on to find out about the different 'anxiety disorders' – the different ways that this 'alarm system' can get activated when it doesn't need to (because there is no actual threat).

Phobias

Specific phobias are fears of objects or situations that are excessive and cause the person some negative impact on their life or their functioning. Examples include fears of animals, heights, aeroplanes, closed spaces, tunnels, bridges, vomiting, dentists or death.

Social Anxiety and shyness

Social phobia is when a person is deeply afraid of panicking or making a fool of themselves in front of others. They often fear their own anxiety response in front of others and feel self-conscious about blushing, sweating or trembling when they are the focus of attention. The anxiety is very high and such people tend to avoid work and social situations where they need to speak up or perform in front of others.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is when a person gets intrusive, obsessional anxious thoughts running through their head – and then they feel compelled to do something to correct or rectify the situation. This can manifest in a variety of ways including (a) repeated **checking** of things like locks and electric devices or taps, (b) urges to **repeat** certain actions for fear that they were not done right, (c) fears of **contamination** and urges to wash in certain ways or avoid objects that are 'risky', (d) doubts about **religious** pureness or correctness, (e) urges to **count** things unnecessarily or an obsession with a number or (f) **intrusive thoughts** about having done (or about to do) some horrendous thing to someone.

Panic Attacks

A panic attack (also known as an anxiety attack) is a sudden episode characterised by feeling afraid and having a range of three or more of the following physical symptoms:

- racing heart
- tightness or pain in the chest,
- difficulty breathing normally
- sweating and feeling hot or flushed
- lightheaded or like you might faint
- nausea
- feeling like things are not real; or you are disengaged from yourself.
- fear of going crazy; fear of losing control
- fear of a heart attack or stroke

Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia

Panic Disorder is the term used to describe when someone has had at least one panic attack and then they fear and dread having more. Sometimes people have many panic attacks each week. Others just had one or two attacks a long time ago, but the memory of that was so horrifying that they would do anything to avoid having another attack. It is understandable to want to avoid situations that you think you will panic in. If the avoidance is quite severe (e.g. unable to go the shops on your own) then we call that **Agoraphobia**.

Excessive Worry or 'Generalised Anxiety Disorder' (GAD).

GAD is a condition in which people worry quite severely, much of every week about a variety of things. The worry usually spans issues to do with health, finances, safety, employment and other future uncertainties. The person with GAD usually feels trapped with their worry – they feel that their worry makes them more prepared and safer but they also worry that they are stressing too much.

Illness Anxiety

Also known as **hypochondriasis**, 'illness anxiety' is when a person feels very anxious about physical sensations and symptoms that they notice. They often get the urge to ask for medical reassurance when they find themselves worrying about their health. Common health anxieties include having cancers, bowel problems, neurological disorders (like MS), or breathing problems. People find that even when they get medical reassurance, the worries and doubts soon return – and therefore so do the urges to research or get more reassurance about those symptoms. They often feel under-treated by their doctors.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a constellation of reactions that a person gets after experiencing an event in which they felt terrified or powerless. The 'alarm system' in the body is alert *all the time*, so the person has trouble relaxing, finds sleep hard, and becomes irritable with poor concentration. At the same time, the brain reminds the person over and over what happened through memories, dreams and visual images. Most people want to avoid all situations that remind them of the traumatic event. Scientists consider this a natural (but unpleasant) way that the brain gets the affected person to stay out of perceived danger from now on.

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE?

Psychological

Cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) has been shown to work for all anxiety disorders. CBT involves working with your clinical psychologist to change the way you respond to anxiety and manage it better. If you would like to know more about this, call to speak to a psychologist. It can provide long-term relief from anxiety and worry without medication

Medical

Some medications can help, so speak to your GP. The main medications that help are the **antidepressants**, which you take for several months and are non-addictive. **Anti-anxiety** drugs can be helpful for short-term relief but can be addictive. These drugs can also prevent a person from getting the full benefits from CBT - so for longer-term cure, it is important to avoid them.