

Therapy for Anxiety Disorders
By
Irene M. Swerdlow-Freed, Psy.D.

Anxiety is a normal part of everyday life, usually caused by work demands, school pressures, family obligations, or other business or social interactions. For most people, these experiences produce only mild anxiety that does not disrupt their ability to function well and enjoy life. However, for individuals with anxiety disorders, this emotion can be intense and overwhelming, severely disrupting even the simplest tasks. It is therefore important to recognize and effectively treat anxiety disorders before they cause severe and unnecessary suffering or distress.

Several types of anxiety disorders, each with its distinct characteristics, have been studied and evaluated. These are discussed below.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is characterized by excessive worries and fears, about health, financial well-being, the future, personal relationships, et cetera. Individuals with generalized anxiety disorder have difficulty viewing upsetting events in their proper perspective. Many such persons harbor a sense of doom or foreboding, convinced some tragedy is about to harm them or a loved one. Some cannot even identify a specific reason for these feelings of intense anxiety, but are nonetheless preoccupied with them, losing their ability to concentrate on important everyday matters.

Panic Disorder is marked by discrete episodes of sudden, intense fear, called *panic attacks*. People who suffer from panic disorder have persistent worries about future panic attacks and often restrict their behavior and activities in order to avoid them. Because symptoms of panic attack are often similar to those of a heart attack, such as shortness of breath, pounding heart and chest pain, individuals experiencing a panic attack may believe they are dying. Even after an attack has passed, excessive fear that another one will occur interferes with their ability to enjoy a normal life.

Phobias are intense, persistent, excessive, or unreasonable fears. A phobic reaction is typically caused by exposure to specific triggers, such as spiders, snakes, flying in an airplane, or heights. Social phobia involves intense fear of exposure to social settings, public places, unfamiliar people, or scrutiny by others.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is marked by persistent, uncontrollable, and intrusive thoughts, feelings or images (obsessions) and repetitive routines, habits or rituals that a person feels compelled to perform to eliminate them (compulsions). Many individuals unsuccessfully try to ignore or suppress their obsessions and find relief only by acting and thinking in highly specific, unproductive, ritualized ways.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder can result from a person's exposure to an extreme traumatic event, such as war, natural disaster, serious injury, et cetera. Recurrent and intrusive memories of the traumatic event along with distressing dreams and other

symptoms of excessive anxiety may persist for many months or years after the actual experience, and disrupt a person's ability to function normally on a day-to-day basis.

All of the anxiety disorders outlined above range from mild to severe in intensity. Without proper treatment they have negative effects on a person's life and well-being. Severe sufferers tend to lead very superficial, restricted and increasingly isolated lives. They are also at risk for depression, and are prone to abuse drugs and alcohol in an attempt to control symptoms. Often, as symptoms worsen, family relationships, work performance and friendships are negatively affected and subject to deterioration.

Fortunately, most anxiety disorders can be effectively treated with a procedure known as "talk therapy." Treatment often involves a combination of two widely used approaches called "behavior therapy" and "cognitive therapy." Behavior therapy typically involves instruction in relaxation, deep breathing techniques, visualization, or learning how to approach anxiety-provoking situations in graduated steps that are designed to counteract excessive anxiety. Cognitive therapy teaches how to recognize maladaptive thoughts that contribute to and sustain symptoms of anxiety, and how to counteract such thoughts using reasoning procedures that reduce eliminate worry. Medication may also be a useful adjunct to talk-therapy, particularly in situations where symptoms are chronic or debilitating.

Each individual with an anxiety disorder needs a specific treatment plan tailored to his/her unique situation, and no single approach will work for all patients. Treatment is most likely to be effective when the individual feels s/he has a collaborative, comfortable relationship with the therapist, and that his/her needs are fully taken into consideration.

For more information or to make an appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at (248) 539-7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.