



MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTRE MANITOBA

Fact Sheet | Living with Anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety. Up to one-third of Canadian women and one-fifth of men will experience serious and persistent anxiety at some point in their lives.

Anxiety is a human emotion that is embedded in our minds and bodies to keep us safe from harm. In early humans the “fight or flight” response to life threatening dangers was a key to survival. In today’s world, we are much less likely to face imminent threats to physical safety but we still have an instinctual reaction that sets off the alarm and tells us to fight the danger or flee.

If we are experiencing high levels of stress and excessive worry, we may find ourselves reacting with that embedded fight or flight – especially when we perceive our worries as immediate and significant threats. If worries and anxiety persist, there is a risk of developing a diagnosable anxiety disorder.

Continuing anxiousness can interfere with how we go about our everyday lives making it hard to cope with regular challenges. Anxiety becomes a problem when we feel anxious most of the time and to the point where worry is out of control and interfering with day to day life.



While there are many types of anxiety disorder, there are some common signs and symptoms:

You might be feeling:

- Very worried or afraid most of the time
- tense and on edge
- nervous or scared
- Panicky
- Irritable, agitated
- Worried you're going crazy
- Detached from your body
- Feeling like you may vomit

You might be thinking:

- Everything's going to go wrong'
- 'I might die'
- 'I can't handle the way I feel'
- 'I can't focus on anything but my worries'
- 'I don't want to go out today'
- 'I can't calm myself down'

You might be experiencing:

- Sleep problems (can't get to sleep, wake often)
- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- 'Pins and needles'
- Stomach aches, churning stomach
- Lightheadedness, dizziness
- Twitches, trembling
- Problems concentrating
- Excessive thirst

Some of these symptoms can also be signs and symptoms of other medical conditions, so it's always best to see your GP so they can check them properly.

Diagnosis

To be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, a combination of symptoms is present on most days for more than six months and interferes with your ability to function at work or at home.

It is common to experience a low mood and excessive worry. The two conditions of clinical depression and anxiety disorder can occur at the same time.

It's important to get help for persistent anxiety. Left untreated, anxiety can last for a long time. It can become exhausting, debilitating and get in the way of living an everyday life.

Types of Anxiety

Panic Disorder:

People who live with a panic disorder describe intense physical and emotional reactions that can be triggered unexpectedly.

These unexpected and repeated attacks may cause a person to avoid situations where panic attacks have happened. Avoidance offers temporary relief but can lead to increased fear of an attack and social isolation. If fear and avoidance continues, daily life can become quite limited, and a person experiencing this may be unable to accomplish once routine tasks. In some instances a person may become house bound.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):

People worry excessively for at least a six-month period about common life matters, such as finances, family or health, when there are no signs of trouble.

Although excessive worry is the main problem, other reactions may include:

- irritability
- muscle tension
- stomach or bowel distress
- racing heart
- insomnia
- restlessness
- fatigue
- trembling or shaking



Phobias:

A phobia is an intense fear of a specific object or situation that poses no real threat or danger.

Common phobias are:

- a fear of heights
- a fear of flying
- a fear of insects and animals

People who experience the above often try to avoid triggers. Avoiding may end up limiting or restricting parts of their lives. For example, a person who has a phobia of air travel may not be able to attend work, family or urgent events far away from home. This may restrict part of their work life but may also lead to feelings of shame and guilt which then has a negative impact on self-esteem.

Social Anxiety:

Social anxiety is much more than blushing in a crowd or shyness when meeting new people. It is an extreme anxiety where the person feels that they are being negatively evaluated or scrutinized by others. This is sometimes accompanied by fear of being publicly embarrassed and can be emotionally overwhelming. Thoughts like, “I’ll die of embarrassment” or “What will they think of me if I do that,” dominate.

The person may have:

- difficulty eating or writing in public
- difficulty maintaining eye contact
- blushing, sweating, dry mouth, racing heart in social interactions

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

PTSD can affect individuals who have experienced a situation where they believed they would be seriously harmed or killed, or where they witnessed situations in which they felt others might be harmed or killed. Examples of such situations are assault, rape, torture, accidents, natural disasters or military combat. People with PTSD often recall such traumatic events with marked fear, helplessness, or horror, even when they are no longer in danger or when the event took place well into the past. The reaction to the trauma continues after the event/s and may be relived or triggered by events, people or environments.

Symptoms of PTSD:

- Panic attacks
- Nightmares/dreams
- High levels of emotional distress
- Anger
- Fear
- Numbness
- Excessive alcohol or drug use

Agoraphobia:

Agoraphobia is sometimes thought to be a fear of open spaces. However, people who have had panic and anxiety in open spaces may also fear shopping centres, public transportation or restaurants and other places where people gather. Most people who have agoraphobia develop it after having one or more panic attacks, causing them to worry about having another attack and avoid the places where it may happen again.

Signs of agoraphobia:

- Often avoiding certain places or situations
- Experiencing stress or discomfort when leaving the house or being in certain situations
- Using avoidance strategies such as having someone else go to stores for you to avoid triggers
- Someone with agoraphobia will experience a sense of fear that's disproportionate with the situation happening
- The fear or phobias will last for six months or more in most people with agoraphobia
- While many people with agoraphobia will try and avoid the places and situations that cause them fear, if they do encounter them they will often become upset or have extreme anxiety

Physical symptoms of intense anxiety and panic can include sweating, problems breathing, trembling, chest pain and dizziness.

Help for Anxiety

It's important to seek help to manage severe anxiety which includes any of the above. Severe anxiety is common and anxiety conditions respond well to counselling, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, self-help, medications and social support. Typically, it will be a combination of factors that help a person get and feel better, such as:

- A well-informed health professional that is comfortable to talk with
- The right psychological and medical therapies
- Support from family and friends
- Peer counselling
- Physical activity and healthy eating

Learning ways to manage challenges and stress, such as problem solving, meditation, mindfulness and yoga.

Resources at MHERC

THE ANXIETY CURE: LIVE A LIFE FREE FROM PANIC | Klaus Bernhardt, 2018.

THE ANXIETY WORKBOOK FOR TEENS: ACTIVITIES TO HELP YOU DEAL WITH ANXIETY AND WORRY | Lisa M Schab, 2008

ANXIETY DISORDERS: AN OVERVIEW OF PERSONAL STORIES AND PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES | ADAM, 2013

Resources in Community

ANXIETY DISORDERS OF MANITOBA | 204-925-0600

ST. BONIFACE HOSPITAL ANXIETY DISORDERS CLINIC | 204-237-2335

PEER SUPPORT

- Peer 2 Peer Connections (a program of MSS) | 204-786-1616
- Seneca Help Line | 204- 942-9276 (7:00 am to 11:00 pm daily)

References and Links

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/healthy-living/your-health/diseases/mental-health-anxiety-disorders.html>

<https://cmha.ca/understanding-mental-illness/anxiety-disorders>

<https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>

<http://www.anxietydisordersontario.ca/anxiety-resource-centre/general-facts-stats-biology-co-occurrences/>

