

ANXIETY – A NORMAL FEELING OR A MENTAL DISORDER?



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DEAR READER,

Everyone has fears and concerns. Sometimes they are, however, unjustified and gain the upper hand. In this case the term used is anxiety disorder. Roughly one in four people experience a mental disorder at some point during their lives. In this Patient Information you can find out more about normal and pathological anxiety and treatment options.

At a glance: anxiety disorders

- Fear is a normal reaction to danger. This reaction helps people to eliminate the source of danger or to escape from it.
- In the case of anxiety disorders, feelings of fear are very strong and exceed the normal. They cause serious impairment to the quality of life and the daily routines of the people affected.
- Doctors or psychotherapists can diagnose an anxiety disorder.
- Anxiety disorders can be successfully treated with psychotherapy or medication.
- In a fear-triggering situation it is important not to avoid an anxiety disorder but rather to face up to it.

▶ WHAT ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Fear is a part of life. Everyone is familiar with this feeling. It protects us in some situations and can even be life-saving.

An anxiety disorder does not involve fear of a real threat. People affected by it have exaggerated fears or are frightened of things or situations which other people see as normal. There are various kinds of anxiety disorder.

The most frequent disorders are:

- Panic disorders: sudden anxiety attacks, extreme anxieties such as fear of death or “panic attacks” which normally only last a few minutes.
- A generalised anxiety disorder: persistent fears and worries which lead to tension, inner turmoil and nervousness.
- Social phobia: fear of being judged negatively by other people.
- Specific phobia: fear of individual things or situations which are not in themselves dangerous like spiders, needles or flying.

Anxiety disorders may be accompanied by physical symptoms of fear like a fast heart rate, perspiration, trembling, difficulty breathing, nausea, tightness in the chest and dizziness.

▶ WHERE DOES NORMAL ANXIETY STOP AND PATHOLOGICAL ANXIETY BEGIN?

Nearly everyone is familiar with the feeling of fear. Someone who has a jittery feeling in a lift, someone who is revolted by spiders or scared of giving a speech doesn't necessarily have an anxiety disorder. If, however, you agree with at least one of the following statements, then you should consult a doctor or therapist:

- I spend more than half the day thinking about my fears.
- My fears considerably impair my quality of life and freedom of movement.
- My fears are making me more and more depressed.
- Because of my fears I have already had suicidal thoughts.
- I often combat my fears with alcohol, drugs or tranquillisers.
- My fears are seriously jeopardising my partnership or my work.

▶ Anxiety Disorders

▶ WHAT LEADS TO ANXIETY DISORDERS?

There are various reasons for the onset of anxiety disorders. Difficult past or current circumstances, adverse parenting practices, social burdens or biological and hereditary factors are seen as the causes. Other existing mental or physical disorders may encourage the emergence of an anxiety disorder.

▶ DIAGNOSING ANXIETY DISORDERS

A doctor or psychotherapist can diagnose whether you have an anxiety disorder in a consultation. To this end, they will ask about the typical symptoms and form an impression of your life situation. It is important for you to trust him and to answer his questions honestly. The more honest you are, the easier it is for your doctor or therapist to make a diagnosis and to plan treatment with you on this basis. You will also be given a physical examination to rule out any other underlying disease behind the symptoms.

▶ TREATING ANXIETY DISORDERS

Anxiety disorders normally respond well to psychotherapy or medication. In addition, measures like sport or relaxation techniques can be helpful. The treatment suitable for you depends on the anxiety disorder you are suffering from, your case history and above all your personal wishes and ideas.

If left untreated, anxiety disorders can become permanent. Only rarely do they disappear on their own. The longer an anxiety disorder exists, the more difficult it is to treat. However, even successfully treated anxiety disorders may re-emerge later on.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and other useful links

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings in the Patient Guideline "Treatment of Anxiety Disorders". You can access all the sources used and the methodology document here:

www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/quellen-und-methodik/angststoerungen

Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 3101 8960.

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▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- The most important thing is to face up to fear-triggering situations and not to flee from them. This means for example: take the lift even when you are scared.
- It helps if you are clear in your own mind that anxiety symptoms like a fast heart rate or dizziness do not lead to damaging consequences like fainting or a heart attack.
- If you suffer from social fears you can practice talking to strangers, giving speeches, looking people in the eye or standing your ground in an argument.
- It is difficult to face up to fear-triggering situations which you have avoided for years. Do this gradually. The more frequently you succeed, the easier it will be for you to dismantle your fears. Enjoy little successes too.
- If necessary, consult your family doctor, go to a psychological counselling centre or directly to a psychotherapist. You don't need a referral. Don't be ashamed of this step. No-one picks his illness. A mental illness, just like a physical illness, is not a question of blame. No-one would be ashamed of going to see a doctor because he has a sore back.
- Accept the fact that treating an anxiety disorder takes time.
- With support, crises can be more easily overcome: be open to offers of support and discussion from your partner, your friends or family members. In self-help groups you can talk to other people with the same disorder.

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