

ANXIETY DISORDERS

A Ready Reckoner

I. Panic Disorder

People with panic disorder have **sudden and repeated attacks of fear** of disaster or of losing control that last for several minutes or longer, even when there is no real danger, called panic attacks.

Physical symptoms can also occur during a panic attack, such as:

- A pounding or racing heart
- Sweating
- Chills
- Trembling
- Breathing problems
- Weakness or dizziness
- Tingly or numb hands
- Chest pain
- Stomach pain
- Nausea

Impact

A person with panic disorder may become discouraged and feel ashamed

because he or she cannot carry out normal routines like going to work, to the shop, or driving. Panic disorder often begins in the late teens or early adulthood. Many parts of the brain, as well as biological processes, play a key role in fear and anxiety.

Treatment

Panic disorder is generally treated with medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), beta-blockers or benzodiazepines. The medication may be combined with first-line psychotherapy such as cognitive behavioral therapy that teaches the person different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to the feelings that come on with a panic attack. The attacks can begin to disappear once the person learns to react differently to the physical sensations of anxiety and fear that occur during panic attacks.

Case Study

25-year-old Radha experiences extreme chest pain, difficulty breathing and is taken to the hospital. She said she was walking her dog outside when she started sweating profusely. Since it wasn't too hot outside, she couldn't understand why. She then started facing trouble breathing and her heart started beating fast. Her knees started feeling weak, it seemed her whole body was shaking and then her arms went numb. She got really scared and thought she was having a heart attack. But this episode lasted only for a few minutes. But her test results for ecocardiogram were in the normal range. The doctor refers Radha to a psychologist.

II. Stress

Stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand. Stress motivates people to prepare or perform, like when they need to take a test or interview for a new job. Stress can even be life-saving in some situations. In response to danger, your body prepares to face a threat or flee to safety. In these situations, your pulse quickens, you breathe faster, your muscles tense, your brain uses more oxygen and increases activity—all functions aimed at survival.

Every type of demand or stressor—such as exercise, work, school, major life changes, or traumatic events—can be stressful. Too much stress can affect health. Signs of the body's response to stress include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased alcohol and other substance use
- Being easily angered
- Feeling depressed
- Having low energy

Health problems can occur if the stress response goes on for too long or becomes chronic, such as when the source of stress is constant, or if the response continues after the danger has subsided.

Case Study

Sanjay is a 40-year-old software official. A single parent, Sanjay sends his son to the nearby international school. He recently lost his job due to downsizing in his department. He received a severance package from his company but is unable to understand why the company retained even those employees who took frequent leaves and were relaxed at work. He is not confident of getting a good job. Due to the tense atmosphere, he ends up frequently yelling at his son. When he hit him a couple of times, the son informs his grandmother and on her intervention, Sanjay agrees to see a therapist. He is diagnosed with stress disorder. It is later revealed that he rarely took days off from work, and frequently yelled at his coworkers for small mistakes.

Impact

With chronic stress, those same life-saving responses in your body can suppress immune, digestive, sleep, and reproductive systems, which may cause them to stop working normally.

Different people may feel stress in different ways. For example, some people experience mainly digestive symptoms, while others may have headaches, sleeplessness, sadness, anger or irritability. People under chronic stress are prone to more frequent and severe viral infections, such as the flu or common cold.

The continued strain on your body from routine stress may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses, as well as mental disorders like depression or anxiety.

Treatment

Stress may be managed with regular exercise, relaxing activities which may incorporate meditation, yoga, tai chi, or other gentle exercises.

III. Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

People with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) feel extremely worried or feel nervous about their job security or performance, health, finances, the well-being of their children, being late or completing household chores on time. Children with GAD worry about their performance in school. People with GAD find it difficult to control their anxiety and stay focused on daily tasks. GAD develops slowly. It often starts during the teen years or young adulthood. People with GAD may:

- Be easily startled, tremble or twitch
- Have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Feel easily tired or tired all the time
- Have headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches, or unexplained pains
- Have a hard time swallowing
- Be irritable or feel “on edge”
- Sweat a lot, feel light-headed or out of breath

Impact

Both children and adults with GAD may experience physical symptoms that make it hard to function and that interfere with daily life. Symptoms may get better or worse at different times, and they are often worse during times of stress, such as with a physical illness, during exams at school, or during a family or relationship conflict.

Treatment

GAD is generally treated with psychotherapy, medication, or both, similar to the treatment of panic disorders.

IV. Social Anxiety Disorder

Social anxiety disorder (also called social phobia) is a mental health condition. It is an intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. This fear can affect work, school, and other day-to-day activities. When having to perform in front of or be around others, people with social anxiety disorder tend to:

- Blush, sweat, tremble, feel a rapid heart rate, or feel their “mind going blank”
- Feel nauseous or sick to their stomach
- Have a rigid body posture, make little eye contact, or speak too softly
- Find it scary and difficult to be with other people, especially those they don’t already know, and have a hard time talking to them even though they wish they could
- Be very self-conscious in front of people, feel embarrassed and awkward
- Be very afraid that other people will judge them
- Stay away from places where there are other people

Treatment

Social anxiety disorder is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk” therapy), medication, or both.

V. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is a common, chronic (long-lasting) disorder in which a person has uncontrollable, recurring thoughts (obsessions) and behaviors (compulsions) that he or she feels the urge to repeat over and over in response to the obsession.

While everyone sometimes feels the need to double check things, people with OCD have uncontrollable thoughts that cause them anxiety, urging them to check things repeatedly or perform routines and rituals for at least 1 hour per day. Performing the routines or rituals may bring brief but temporary relief from the anxiety.

Impact

Left untreated, these thoughts and rituals cause the person great distress and get in the way of work, school, and personal relationships. Some people with OCD also have a tic disorder. Motor tics are sudden, brief, repetitive movements, such as eye blinking, facial grimacing, shoulder shrugging, or head or shoulder jerking. Common vocal tics include repetitive throat-clearing, sniffing, or grunting sounds.

Obsessions may include:

- Fear of germs or contamination
- Fear of losing or misplacing something
- Worries about harm coming towards oneself or others
- Unwanted and taboo thoughts involving sex, religion, or others
- Having things symmetrical or in perfect order

Compulsions may include:

- Excessively cleaning or washing a body part
- Keeping or hoarding unnecessary objects
- Ordering or arranging items in a particular, precise way
- Repeatedly checking on things, such as making sure that the door is locked or the oven is off
- Repeatedly counting items or constantly seeking reassurance

Age

OCD usually begins in adolescence or young adulthood, and tends to appear at a younger age in boys than in girls. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain, as well as biological processes, play a key role in obsessive thoughts and compulsive behavior, as well as the fear and anxiety related to them. Researchers also know that people who have suffered physical or sexual trauma are at an increased risk for OCD.

Treatment

Exposure and Response Prevention (EX/RP) is a specific form of cognitive behavioral therapy which has been shown to help many patients recover from OCD. EX/RP involves gradually exposing the person to his or her fears or obsessions and teaching healthy ways to deal with the anxiety they cause. Other therapies, such as habit reversal training, can also help overcome compulsions.

References

www.nimh.nih.gov

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This resource was designed by REACH as part of our efforts to help improve the quality and frequency of media reporting on NCDs.

If you have any questions, please write to us at media@reachindia.org.in