

Anxiety : A Mental Health Guide

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- **What is anxiety ?**

Anxiety is a word derived from the Latin word 'Anxietas', meaning 'uneasy or troubled'. Anxiety is nothing but a natural response to stressful situations often characterised by feelings of fear, distress and worry. For e.g. - A student might get so nervous and anxious for his semester exams that he might eat irregularly, experience lack of sleep and keep panicking over his/her exams. This can be chalked down to anxiety. Occasional anxiety is perfectly normal when the situation calls for it. Just like occasional sadness doesn't necessarily mean you're suffering from depression, occasional instances of anxiety cannot lead to the diagnosis of an anxiety disorder. But when these instances of anxiety are more frequent, persistent and long-lasting with greater intensity, causing problems in our daily lives and tasks and becoming difficult to control, one needs to evaluate if they are suffering from anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorder comes with a cluster of disorders which exhibit different manifestations of anxiety. The most common types of anxiety disorders are as follows :

1. **Generalised Anxiety Disorder** - If an individual constantly keeps worrying about routine activities and events in their life to such an extent that the worrying is beyond control, they might be suffering from generalised anxiety disorder or 'GAD'. These worries often affect their daily functioning and might even have physiological effects. These individuals feel anxiety about the most routine stuff, anxiety which is often disproportionate to the circumstances that cause it. If a person exhibits this behaviour persistently for more than six months, they can be diagnosed with GAD. For e.g.- Sarah experiences anxiety with her loved ones, often afraid that they are mad at her or disappointed with her for some reason or the other, sometimes even going so far as to constantly asking them if they are mad at her. She needs constant reassurance from her loved ones or else her constant fear keeps eating away at her. This affects her daily life and functioning to a great extent.
2. **Phobias** - Phobia is derived from the name of the Greek God 'Phobos', the god of fear. If an individual has an irrational fear of a particular object, event or phenomenon to an extent that it affects his daily life in a negative manner, they are diagnosed with a phobia. Characterised by excessive anxiety, a person with a specific phobia, tries to avoid that object, event or phenomenon that causes his/her anxiety. For e.g. - A person afraid of needles may try his best to avoid the situation that calls for it such as getting an injection. A fear of confined spaces is referred to as 'claustrophobia', a fear of blood is 'hemophobia', a fear of heights is 'acrophobia', a fear of snakes is 'ophidiophobia' and so on.
3. **Social anxiety disorder** - Social anxiety disorder, also commonly referred to as 'social anxiety', is an excessive and irrational fear of social situations and interactions due to fear of being humiliated or judged or getting embarrassed in front of everyone. One of the most common, everyday life examples of this can be found in a classroom. Consider a student who

knows the answer to the question a teacher asks yet he keeps quiet and avoids raising his hand due to the fear of being wrong and getting laughed at by everyone else. Though this individual may not be suffering from the actual social anxiety disorder, this behaviour he exhibits is a crystal clear sign of social anxiety.

4. **Separation Anxiety Disorder** - Separation anxiety disorder is one in which the individual experiences intense and uncontrollable anxiety about losing or being away from their loved ones. For e.g. - Often observed in children, they are afraid to see their parents leave even if it is momentarily and are afraid they might not come back. This phenomenon can also be seen in teens and older adults, not just children.
5. **Agoraphobia** - Agoraphobia refers to an extreme and irrational fear of being trapped in an inescapable situation. Often misunderstood as a simple fear of leaving the house, agoraphobia extends beyond that and is a recurring tendency to avoid feelings of helplessness and being trapped. For e.g. - A child who gets brutally bullied or ridiculed at school might become increasingly anxious and scared leading him to make up excuses to avoid going to school.

Common signs and symptoms :

1. Anxiety can manifest in very intense and uncontrollable ways. Common physical symptoms of anxiety may include : heart palpitations, nausea, cold or clammy hands, shortness of breath, muscle tension, numbness or tingling in hands and feet and so on.
2. Anxiety disorders can also lead to a difficulty in falling asleep. Or, even if an individual does manage to fall asleep, anxiety can lead to restlessness in sleep, what we often playfully refer to as ‘twisting and turning’ in our sleep.
3. Anxiety can be characterised by an inability to sit still and be calm. For e.g. - An individual suffering from an anxiety disorder might find it very difficult to keep their hands and feet still. They might have fidgety hands or restless feet. They might keep constantly shaking their leg or tapping it constantly on the floor. This is referred to as ‘Restless Leg Syndrome’ and is a very common symptom of anxiety.
4. A major symptom of anxiety is uncontrollable and obsessive thoughts. A person experiences these to an extent which is detrimental to his mental health and well-being in everyday life. For e.g.- Consider a daily life example where you leave the house and worry if you kept the stove on. An individual suffering from anxiety might take such a thought to dangerous heights, constantly worrying whether they kept the stove on or not, worrying that their house might burn down and they might have to live on the streets and so on and so on. This apocalyptic and pessimistically farfetched line of thought is often a common symptom of anxiety.
5. Anxiety is characterised by feelings of panic, fear or uneasiness. Constantly panicking about a situation or its outcomes is a very prominent symptom of anxiety. This constant state of panic and fear might lead a person to be too stuck in their own mind, a sort of detachment from what is real and true, leading to difficulty in or a lack of concentration, which is also a symptom of anxiety.

6. Another symptom of anxiety is perfectionism. Perfectionism is characterised by a recurring doubt about whether our work or activity is good enough and acts as an attempt to fix that piece of work or activity till it is perfect and flawless. But, it is important to know and understand and not everything can be perfect and it doesn't have to be.

Early Indicators :

1. Worrying, which is a major characteristic of anxiety, of course is also an early indicator of it. One might start out by worrying about simple things like a test and it is not completely uncalled for since the circumstances do call for it. But, when an individual shows more signs of fear about components of their daily lives, and after a certain point of time, starts worrying about anything and everything no matter how big or small it is, it is an indicator that they might be developing anxiety disorder.
2. Sleep is largely affected by anxiety and hence sleep, specifically restlessness in sleep, is a strong indicator of anxiety. A person might find it difficult to get a good night's sleep or even fall asleep at all. They might wake up in the middle of the night, having had a nightmare or covered in sweat. Such instances can often point to anxiety as the leading cause.
3. Physiological changes can also be clear indicators of anxiety. An individual might experience sudden changes in the rate of their heartbeats, and might feel their heartbeat rapidly speeding up in an increased number of circumstances or situations, even if those situations are completely harmless. This can be a strong indicator of the early stages of anxiety disorder. Another strong physiological indicator of anxiety is a frequent shortness of breath.
4. Mental disorders take away so much of our energy. The same goes for anxiety disorder, where feelings of fatigue and tiredness can be seen as early indicators of the same.
5. Constantly worrying about one's choices, rethinking and second-guessing one's decisions, or to be more precise, overthinking and indecisiveness can be seen as early indicators of anxiety.

Relevant Stats

- According to WHO, about 301 million people around the world suffer from anxiety disorders, which is approximately 4 % of the entire population.
- Approximately 1 in 4 people receive treatment for this condition.
- Women are more likely to experience an anxiety disorder as compared to men.
- According to Forbes, anxiety disorders are the most common disorders in the United States, affecting over 19.1% of the population, which is approximately 40 million people.
- According to recent statistics:
 - In India, approximately 1 in 14 people suffer from anxiety disorders.
 - In the United States, it is estimated that 1 in 3 people are affected by anxiety.
 - Globally speaking, 1 in 14 people experiences depression.
- Looking at the statistics on depression with respect to age groups, we may notice that :
 1. In the age group of 12-18, approximately 1 in 15 people experienced anxiety disorders.

2. In the age group of 19-60, it's estimated that 1 in 10 adults are affected by anxiety disorders.
3. In the age group of 61-80, 1 in 13 people experience anxiety disorders

Preventative Measures :

1. Anxiety as a disorder often involves unhealthy and obsessive fixation over past experiences and future outcomes. Practices like mindfulness, meditation and yoga can be extremely effective in preventing and/or healing anxiety since they promote being at peace with oneself, and learning to engage ourselves completely in the present moment rather than focusing on anything else. These practices can help foster a sense of stability and calmness in one's mind and reduce stress, helping them greatly in their struggle with anxiety.
2. Incorporating exercise into our daily routines can also help to prevent anxiety disorders. Exercise is proven to release brain chemicals such as endorphins which are natural mood enhancers and these help in alleviating anxiety.
3. A balanced nutrition is one of the key aspects in a healthy and happy life. Eating foods rich in antioxidants, vitamins and other nutritious elements essential to our well-being can improve physical health as well as brain health. The food choices we make have a significant impact not only on our health, but also on our mood.
4. Getting an adequate amount of sleep is also a very important preventative measure for anxiety. Lack of sleep can lead to heightened stress levels and a lack of concentration, which can increase one's vulnerability to anxiety.
5. Cultivating and nurturing positive social connections can also be a great way to prevent and/or heal anxiety. Talking to people close and supportive to us, such as friends and family can help one significantly in times of distress. When it comes to mental illness, the mind can be your worst enemy, which is why it's important to avoid isolating oneself and communicate with your loved ones on a frequent basis.
6. Limiting caffeine and sugar can be a very efficient and effective way of preventing anxiety. These substances boost our adrenaline and keep us alert all the time. If consumed in excess quantities, these substances can lead to dangerously high levels of adrenaline in our body, which will further lead our body to being in a perpetual state of 'fight or flight', hence increasing our vulnerability to anxiety. This is why it is important to consume these substances in moderation or if possible, avoid them altogether and switch to a healthier alternative like green tea.
7. Learning relaxation techniques will be a worthy weapon in one's battle with anxiety. The practice of deep diaphragmatic breathing helps to slow heart rate, lower blood pressure and reduce tension, all of which are associated with the experience of anxiety. Learning this practice can help one to reduce anxiety by equipping oneself to go from an anxious state into a relaxed state of mind. Guided imagery is also a very effective relaxation strategy, which often involves thinking of visually calming images for e.g.- your favourite beach, or a peaceful, sunlit park, etc.
8. Setting realistic goals is also a very important preventative measure for anxiety. When we set very high and nearly unattainable goals, we are in a constant race of sorts to achieve those goals which leads to a significant increase in our stress and anxiety levels. Setting manageable and realistic goals and avoiding overcommitment to things can prevent anxiety from arising altogether.

9. Developing effective time management skills can also act as a preventative measure for anxiety. Habits such as procrastination which is characterised by poor decision-making and bad time management skills can lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Working on a schedule that allows sufficient amount of time for productive work and allows time for rest and relaxation will not only help in reducing and preventing anxiety but will also improve the quality of our work.
10. Of course, seeking professional help is always a great option to go with when dealing with anxiety disorders or trying to prevent them. Professionals can offer us correct guidance and provide useful information about strategies helpful in dealing with anxiety.

Ice-Breakers

1. Open-ended questions such as “How has your day been?” or “ I noticed you’ve been more quiet lately. Is everything okay, do you want to talk about it ?” are always a great way to go when communicating with a person suffering from any kind of mental disorder, not just anxiety. Most times, it is the case that these individuals simply want someone to listen to them without judgement, so these open-ended questions can be a very effective conversation-starter.
2. Expressing empathy about their struggle can also help the individual to be more comfortable communicating with you and telling you about their problems. When the individual knows you are taking them seriously and are genuinely trying to understand what they’re going through, they will be more inclined to talk about their experiences with you.
3. Sharing experiences and discussing coping strategies that may have helped you in the past when dealing with anxiety and stress can pave a path for meaningful discussion between you and the affected individual.
4. Offering support to the affected individual such as offering to explore and evaluate coping strategies to help with their will not only help them in their struggle but also strengthen the bond between you and the affected individual, making it more long-lasting and pure.
5. Casual conversation starters such as discussing your favourite TV shows, artists or hobbies can also help to create a sense of friendship through shared interests , thereby facilitating open space for effective communication.
6. Complimenting the individual about their traits and being more positive around them can also be very helpful since it can help alleviate or at the very least temporarily dull their self-doubt, and foster a genuine sense of compassion and trust between you and them.
7. Last, but definitely not the very least , acknowledging the individual's feelings is a crucial ice-breaker for nearly any meaningful communication about mental disorders. If you are judgemental and simply dismiss the individual’s feelings as ridiculous or foolish, not only will it make the individual’s self-doubt worse and more severe, but it will indefinitely close down any path for further communication about their struggle. This is why it is of great importance to acknowledge their feelings, let them know that what they are feeling is valid and that it deserves to be heard and taken into careful consideration.