

A Story about Anxiety

Once upon a time, in a quiet village, lived a woman named Monica. She was an amiable soul with a laughter that would brighten anyone's day, but of late, a worrisome cloud hovered over her.

Monica had a gnawing fear, something that ached her heart both literally and metaphorically. She suspected that she was suffering from a serious heart condition. Her fears were fueled by daily episodes that felt eerily akin to heart attacks. Each day, she'd endure three or four of these terrifying incidents, their unpredictability making her anxiety even worse.

These episodes would start without warning, striking her like a bolt out of the blue. Suddenly, her heart would start pounding like a runaway train, and she would feel a prickly sensation, like pins and needles, all over her body. Cold sweat would drench her, and the world around her would spin like a merry-go-round gone awry. It was as if her heart was an overinflated balloon on the verge of bursting. She felt a constricting sensation around her throat, making each breath a struggle. These moments were filled with overwhelming fear, a morbid certainty that she was on the brink of death.

Desperate for answers, Monica visited the local government hospital. They ran several tests, searching for an explanation to her symptoms, but to Monica's surprise, they found nothing amiss. They assured her that she was not sick and that her body was functioning normally.

Confused and afraid, she confided in her relatives. Some suggested that it was all due to stress, a psychosomatic manifestation of her worries. Others, with a more traditional mindset, hinted at a potential 'spiritual issue', a supernatural cause for her inexplicable distress.

Monica's story is one of a fear turned into a haunting reality, a testament to the complexity of human health. The confusion between the physical and the psychological, the traditional and the modern, echoes in her search for answers and relief. This tale serves as a reminder that understanding and addressing health issues is a complex task that extends beyond the realms of mere physical diagnosis.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like sweating, rapid heartbeat, and rapid shallow breathing.

It's normal to experience anxiety in response to stressful events. Such instances might include pre-exam jitters, feeling uneasy while travelling on a dark road, or encountering a potentially dangerous creature like a snake.

But when these feelings become excessive, last for longer than six months, and interfere with daily life, they could signify an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are a group of mental health conditions that include

Generalized anxiety disorder,

Panic disorder

Specific phobias

Social anxiety disorder

Those struggling with severe anxiety can experience the aforementioned symptoms excessively and persistently for more than four weeks, to the point where it hampers their ability to function normally in their daily life - be it at work, school, home, or within their social circles. They find it challenging to maintain a state of calm and are constantly tense. This condition can even hinder their ability to focus on routine tasks and social activities.

Who gets Anxiety?

Anyone can get anxiety. For example, the fear of getting Covid19 has caused anxiety in many people. But, if you follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs), your anxiety will reduce or even go away. Many young people have very high levels of anxiety about their studies and their future which is uncertain and threatened by factors they cannot control. Factors such as school closure because of Covid19, rising tuition costs and high levels of un-employment in those who have already successfully completed their studies.

How common is it?

Anxiety disorders affect one in four individuals worldwide. Majority of the cases are people with mild or moderate severity of anxiety which is amenable to talk therapy.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety does not have a single cause. Instead, it is believed that many factors come together to cause an anxiety disorder. Some of these factors include;

Body factors: Certain conditions in our bodies may increase the chances of someone getting anxiety. These include being born with certain genes, high levels of certain hormones and others. The condition is also more common in females.

Psychological factors: These factors refer to the way we feel and think about ourselves, the way we view challenging situations and how we approach them. If someone see's themselves as vulnerable and insignificant, when they are faced with a problem, they may get anxious since they believe they cannot deal with it. Others avoid problems or postpone dealing with them. With time they accumulate leading to the person getting high levels of anxiety when the problems pile up.

Social factors: These refer to situations in the society in which someone lives and includes their family structure, being very poor, lacking support of family and friends, witnessing or experiencing traumatising events such as war, accidents, sexual abuse and others.

How does Anxiety present?

Anxiety can present itself in numerous ways, and it varies greatly among individuals. The symptoms can be physical, emotional, or behavioral. Here are some common ways anxiety may present:

1. Emotional Symptoms:

- Feelings of intense worry or fear.
- Feeling nervous, restless, or tense.
- A sense of impending doom, panic, or danger.
- Feelings of irritability or unease.

2. Physical Symptoms:

- Increased heart rate or palpitations.
- Sweating excessively, trembling, or feeling weak.
- Breathing rapidly (hyperventilation) or shortness of breath.
- Feeling tired easily or fatigue.
- Trouble sleeping, including difficulties falling asleep and staying asleep.
- Gastrointestinal problems like nausea or diarrhea.
- Frequent urination or diarrhea.

3. Behavioral Symptoms:

- Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank.
- Avoiding situations or places that trigger anxiety.
- Difficulty carrying out daily tasks and responsibilities.

4. Cognitive Symptoms:

- Excessive worry about past or future events.
- Catastrophizing or expecting the worst in situations.
- Trouble making decisions due to fear of making the wrong choice.
- Fear of interacting with others, often due to fear of judgment or embarrassment.

It's important to note that having anxiety can also lead to or coincide with other mental health conditions like depression.

How is anxiety treated?

Mild to moderate anxiety symptoms are treated through a combination of psychotherapy, and lifestyle changes.

1. Psychotherapy (Counseling):

● In psychotherapy, the affected person learns different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to anxiety-producing and fearful situations.

● They learn positive ways of coping with stress, they learn to regulate their emotions, and improve relationships with others.

2. Lifestyle Changes: A healthy lifestyle can significantly help manage anxiety. This can include regular physical exercise, a balanced diet, avoiding caffeine and alcohol, and ensuring adequate sleep.

3. Relaxation Techniques: These can help reduce symptoms of anxiety and include methods such as meditation, deep breathing exercises, long baths, yoga, and tai chi.

4. Self-Care Practices: These can involve regular physical activity, adequate rest, maintaining a regular eating schedule, and taking time each day to relax or engage in activities you enjoy.

5. Support Groups: Joining a group of people with similar problems can provide emotional support and shared coping strategies.

Anxiety disorders are managed with both psychotherapy and medications. It's important to consult a healthcare professional to discuss treatment options if you're experiencing severe symptoms of anxiety.

Medication: Several types of medications may be used to treat anxiety disorders, including:

● Antidepressants: Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are commonly used to treat anxiety.

● Benzodiazepines: These are anti-anxiety drugs used for short-term relief of acute symptoms.

● Beta-Blockers: These drugs can help manage certain physical symptoms of anxiety, such as rapid heart rate.

What complications arise in case anxiety is not treated?

If left untreated, anxiety can lead to several complications that affect both physical health and quality of life. Some of these complications include:

1. **Mental Health Disorders:** Anxiety often coexists with other mental health disorders, like depression, eating disorders, or substance abuse. Untreated anxiety can worsen these conditions or even trigger their onset.
2. **Physical Health Problems:** Chronic anxiety can contribute to physical health issues like heart disease, gastrointestinal problems, and respiratory disorders. It can also lead to chronic headaches, sleep disorders, and general unwellness.
3. **Social Isolation:** People with untreated anxiety may withdraw from social situations and activities they once enjoyed, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness.
4. **Poor Quality of Life:** Living with persistent worry or fear can make it difficult to enjoy life, perform at work or school, maintain relationships, or carry out everyday activities.
5. **Suicidal Thoughts or Behavior:** In severe cases, untreated anxiety can lead to feelings of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, or suicide attempts.
6. **Substance Abuse:** Some people may turn to alcohol, drugs, or other substances to self-medicate their anxiety symptoms, leading to substance abuse and addiction issues.
7. **Impaired Cognitive Function:** Anxiety can lead to difficulties in concentration, decision making, and memory.

It's important to note that effective treatments for anxiety are available. If you're experiencing symptoms of anxiety, reach out to a healthcare professional who can guide you towards the right treatment plan for you. The earlier anxiety is addressed, the more likely it is to prevent these complications.