



UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY DISORDERS & PHOBIAS

What Is An Anxiety Disorder?

Everyone experiences anxiety at some point in their life. People become anxious when they have to face a highly stressful situation like taking a test, going for a job interview, or getting married. When one is anxious and under stress the body reacts: hands become clammy, the heart beats a little faster, and one can even feel light-headed or dizzy. Some people become preoccupied with fear and worry, and the intense feelings of anxiety continue. If this happens, an individual may have an anxiety disorder.

One in ten Canadians are living with an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in Canada. Without treatment an individual's physical, mental, and emotional health may be in jeopardy. Anxiety disorders can also lead to alcohol and/or drug abuse, family problems, depression, and in some cases, suicide.



What Is Panic Disorder?

It has been reported in Canada that 21% of people, age 15 and older has experienced a panic attack at some point in their lives. During a panic attack sensations such as sweating, nausea, trembling, and numbness in the legs or hands, dizziness, hot or cold flashes, a feeling of tightness or pressure in the chest, hyperventilation, "jelly" legs or blurred vision can develop. Individuals may even feel like they are going to die of a heart attack or lose control of their body functions.

These intense feelings of panic usually do not last for very long and most people brush off the episode as a momentary "freak out". However, some people become very agitated and develop a fear of it happening again. If an individual has more than four panic attacks within a month or a panic attack occurs when the individual is not in an anxious or stressful situation, it is probable that they have a panic disorder. Individuals who are susceptible to panic attacks are more likely to be concerned with illness, death, or losing control. The average age of onset for panic disorders is usually 25-33 years old, and is reported to affect women more often than men.

What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?

People with obsessive-compulsive disorder experience unwanted thoughts that can cause the individual to feel anxious. Irrational thought may concern contaminating themselves or others with dirt or germs, or they may be obsessed about their own safety or the safety of a loved one. In response to their obsessive thought the individual may need to think neutralizing thoughts or to perform certain compulsive rituals, which might include repetitive hand washing or counting. As with phobias a traumatic event can trigger obsessive thoughts or behaviour. If untreated, this condition can result in severe impairment in many areas such as school, work, and relationships.

Other Forms Of Anxiety Disorders

- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:** PTSD is an anxiety reaction to a life threatening or traumatic event (i.e. A car accident, rape, or war). Individuals with PTSD may also suffer from nightmares and insomnia.
- **Generalized Anxiety:** People with generalized anxiety disorder often worry excessively about things that they know are not real issues or are illogical. Physical problems might include general symptoms of anxiety; body tension, lack of concentration, shakiness, insomnia, irritability, and irritable feelings.

What Are Phobias?

A phobia is an irrational and uncontrollable fear of an object or a situation. Phobias may develop as a result of a traumatizing or frightening experience, or it may be unclear how a phobia started. If an individual is prone to excessive anxiety and stress, they are more vulnerable to panic attacks and phobias. People with phobias experience feelings of intense panic when confronted by whatever it is that frightens them and go to considerable lengths to avoid the object or situation to reduce their anxiety. Types of phobias can include:

- **Social Phobia:** Individuals with a social phobia often have difficulty starting a conversation, asking questions, making friends, or joining groups. The anxiety produced by a social phobia can be so intense that it provokes blushing, stammering, sweating, stomach upsets, a racing heart, trembling limbs, or even a full scale panic attack. It is an excessive fear of being judged or criticized and affects 3% of Canadians. It is called a crippling shyness or the illness of missed opportunity.
- **Specific Phobia:** People with a specific phobia only experience anxiety when confronted with the thing they most fear. The fear is persistent, unreasonable and causes high stress. Common fears are thunderstorms, heights, and certain animals like snakes and spiders. Of all the anxiety disorders, specific phobias are the best understood and most responsive to treatment.

What Are The Treatments For Anxiety Disorders and Phobias?

There has been a lot of progress in the understanding and diagnosis of the various forms of anxiety disorders. Treatment is specific to the severity of the disorder. The most effective forms of therapy are based on cognitive behavioral approaches. Individuals may also learn calming techniques, use meditative therapy, and may take medication prescribed to help their anxiety. Graded exposure therapy may be used to gradually reintroduce an individual to a phobia.

Where Can I Get Help?

If possible, schedule an appointment with your family doctor to address any concerns you may have. They may be able to address your concerns, refer you to a specialist, or provide other resources that may be able to assist you. You can also find information at the following:

www.anxietycanada.ca

<http://www.socialanxietysupport.com/disorder/>

www.anxietytreatment.ca

www.durham.cmha.ca

Source: Adapted from Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario Division

*The Canadian Mental Health Association is a community based mental health service that provides support to people who have experienced mental health issues and their families and friends. These information sheets have been created by people in the community including individuals who have experienced mental health issues, family members and mental health practitioners. We recognize that there are many different perspectives about mental health issues and encourage people to increase their understanding by learning from a variety of sources. Hopefully, these information sheets will assist in raising community awareness and promote greater **UNDERSTANDING** of mental health issues.*



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Helping people move forward

This information is of a general nature. For more information and resources please contact:
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