

Anxiety and Panic Responses

This is an anxious generation. Add into the mix the anxiety surrounding the events of April 16, 2007 on the Virginia Tech campus and you may find more and more students exhibiting signs of anxiety.

According to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA), more than 40 million American men and women are diagnosed with anxiety disorders annually. Close to seven percent of college students report having symptoms. And these disorders often surface during a person's teens or twenties – prime college age.

Anxiety disorders can happen to anyone. Twice as many women as men report anxiety disorders and 30% of women will suffer from an anxiety disorder during their lifetime.

They occur when everyday events cause severe, persistent anxiety that gets in the way of healthy living.

Sometimes these disorders manifest themselves as social anxiety disorders, impacting people's ability to be with other people. Other times individuals are affected by traumatic events or suffer from panic disorder.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

Here are several types of anxiety disorders, as researched by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH):

- **Phobias.** Social phobia, sometimes also referred to as social anxiety disorder, is when people are disabled by an overwhelming fear of scrutiny, humiliation or embarrassment in social situations. As a result, they often avoid social scenes. Specific phobia is a condition where sufferers have an extreme, irrational and disabling fear of something that actually poses little or no danger. This can lead to unnecessary life limitations.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).** About 3.3 million Americans suffer from OCD each year. Recurrent, unwanted obsessions or compulsive rituals that sufferers feel are out of their control mark this disorder. Performing rituals such as counting or hand washing often provides only temporary relief, as this illness is often chronic and subject to relapses.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder.** Sufferers experience consistent, exaggerated worries about everyday events and activities, expecting the worst even when there's no rational reason to do so. This disorder lasts at least six months and is accompanied by physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, fatigue, trembling and muscle tension.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** People who have experi-

enced a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a car crash, child abuse, rape, assault, or war may have flashbacks, nightmares, or a numbing of their emotions. They may also feel depressed, irritable, angry, and easily startled or distracted. According to the NIMH, PTSD may also be triggered by something a sufferer witnessed "such as mass destruction after a plane crash." Or the repeated images of a campus shooting.

Understanding Panic Attacks

You may have seen someone in the throes of a panic attack. Chances are she was sweating, her heart was racing, she felt dizzy and had a tough time catching her breath. It's a frightening situation to witness, let alone experience.

Panic attacks are extremely frightening, and they plague about 1 in 75 adults. Usually, they first occur between the ages of 20 and 30. Know anyone in that age range?

Though many people who experience a panic attack will not have another one, some will develop what is known as Panic Disorder, which causes frequent attacks and, in some cases, an unwillingness to do activities or go to places the person associates with them. Luckily, when a person recognizes her condition and seeks help, the therapy for Panic Disorder is highly effective in eliminating or greatly decreasing attacks.

Signs of a Panic Attack

- ✓ Rapid heart rate
- ✓ Sweating/hot flashes
- ✓ Trembling
- ✓ Shortness of breath or hyperventilation
- ✓ Tingling in fingers or toes
- ✓ Nausea
- ✓ Chest pain
- ✓ Headache
- ✓ Dizziness
- ✓ A sense of impending death

Many people go to the emergency room after they feel these symptoms due to the similarity to those of a heart attack. Panic attacks start abruptly and often last about 10 minutes. It is important to remember that although they are terrifying, panic attacks are not physically harmful.

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