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## Anxiety Disorders

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It can drive us to be creative under pressure, warn us of danger or spur us to take action in the face of a crisis. It can also freeze us in our tracks. But like it or not, anxiety is an intense state that most Canadians experience from time to time.

Anxiety affects us physically, emotionally and in all aspects of our life situations, according to the Anxiety Disorders Association of BC (ADABC). Normally, it plays an important role in survival. When we encounter a threatening situation, our bodies prepare for danger by producing more adrenaline and increasing the blood flow and heart rate, among other things. This instinctive "fight or flight" response can help a person survive a physical attack or an earthquake, for example.

Nevertheless, most modern "dangers" such as unemployment are not ones a person can fight with their fists or run away from. With no outlet for release, the body may remain in a state of constant mental and physical alertness that can be extremely draining over the long term. When anxiety persists for weeks and months, when it develops into a relentless sense of dread or starts to interfere with a person's daily life, then anxiety has moved beyond the realm of ordinary anxiety, according to ADABC.

"A person with this degree of anxiety may require outside help to feel safe in the world again," says Elen Alexov, ADABC President. Emotionally, people with anxiety may feel apprehensive, irritable, or constantly afraid that bad things will happen to them and people close to them. Depending on its intensity, anxiety can make people feel trapped in their homes, too frightened to even open the door. Anxiety is the most common form of mental disorder, affecting 12% of BC's population in any given year. Besides general anxiety, described above, anxiety can take many forms. Major types of anxiety disorders include phobias, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

A number of different factors can increase the risk of developing an anxiety disorder including past experiences, learned behaviours (e.g. avoidant coping style) and a genetic predisposition, to name a few. There is not one single cause and it is usually a combination of these types of risk factors that lead to the onset of an anxiety disorder for any one individual.

Sometimes anxiety exists alongside other mental disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder. When this happens, a person's abilities are more impaired by illness and the risk of suicide increases dramatically. For example, a 2005 study found that pre-existing anxiety disorders were a risk factor for thinking about or attempting

### Do I Have an Anxiety Disorder?

- I am often startled by the smallest thing
- I worry that something terrible will happen to me or others
- I am easily irritable
- I get sudden fears of dying or doing something out of control
- I often worry that something has not been done correctly even though I know I completed the task properly
- I am extremely worried about disease (e.g. germs, infections, dirt, dust, contaminants, cleanliness)
- I need constant reassurance
- I often find myself doing things repeatedly (e.g. hand washing, showering, tooth brushing)

### Body Relaxation Technique

Use this exercise to relax whenever you need to. Many people also find it helpful before falling asleep:

- breathe slowly and deeply, making your abdomen rise

suicide; this risk increased when other conditions were also present, particularly mood disorders.

Panic attacks involve a sudden onset of intense apprehension, fear and terror, as well as feelings of impending doom. These attacks may cause shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, trembling and shaking, a feeling of disconnectedness from reality and even a fear of dying. Though they last only a short time, panic attacks are frightening experiences that may increase in frequency if left untreated.

People with phobias have overwhelming feelings of terror or panic when confronted with a feared object, situation or activity. Many phobias are common—such as a fear of enclosed spaces, airplanes or fear of spiders or snakes—and have a specific name.

For example, people with agoraphobia feel terrified of being in crowded situations or public places, or any situation where help is not immediately available. Their anxiety may become so intense that they fear they will faint, have a heart attack or lose control. These people often avoid any situation in which escape may be difficult (e.g., in an airplane), impossible or embarrassing. In some cases, people with agoraphobia may become house-bound for years.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is another type of anxiety disorder. A compulsion or compulsive act becomes a way of coping with the anxiety created by an obsession, which is a recurring unpleasant thought. For example, a recurring thought such as "I am dirty" may lead to repeated acts of hand-washing as a means of dealing with the obsession and the resulting anxiety. Washing one's hands provides a momentary respite from the anxiety of the obsessive thought, but since the relief is usually short-lived, the compulsive behaviour is often repeated over and over. People caught in this cycle may wash their hands repeatedly until the skin is rubbed raw.

Other compulsive acts include repeatedly checking that a door is locked or that a stove is switched off. Common obsessions include recurring thoughts of specific images, numbers or words.

Some people who have survived a severe and often violent physical or mental trauma may have a sense of reliving the trauma many years later. They may develop post-traumatic stress disorder, which involves re-experiencing traumatic events such as a car crash, rape or a life-threatening robbery through nightmares, night terrors or flashbacks.

Among the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are numbing one's self emotionally, experiencing an overall sense of anxiety and dread or feeling plagued by guilt about one's own survival. War veterans are particularly vulnerable to this form of anxiety which can affect one's memory and ability to concentrate and sleep.

Though people with clinical anxiety often feel trapped in a cycle of fear, anxiety disorders are among the most successfully treated forms of mental disorder, according to ADABC. Many people benefit from cognitive-behavioural therapy which is based on the idea that people can alter their emotions and even improve their symptoms by re-evaluating their attitudes, thought patterns and interpretations of events. An effective treatment plan may also include medication, self-help groups, and relaxation techniques. Also beneficial is education about the nature of anxiety, its effects on the body and the role it can

and fall with your breaths

- tighten your foot muscles, curling your toes, and hold for as long as you can
- then release, feeling the warm sensation as your muscles loosen
- repeat with your calf muscles, then work up through the rest of the body
- end by tightening your forehead and scalp muscles
- as you release your body tension, release all thoughts

Source: BC Medical Association

### Tips for Talking to Your Doctor

The average patient asks only two questions during an entire medical visit lasting an average of 15 minutes. However, studies demonstrate that patients who are actively involved in decision-making are more satisfied, have a better quality of life and have better health outcomes. Since most people's treatment path for a mental disorder begins in the family doctor's office, below are some tips for empowering yourself and starting a conversation about disabling anxiety in your life:

- **Plan** — Think about what you want to tell your doctor or learn from your doctor today. Once you have a list, number the most important things.
- **Report** — When you see the doctor, tell your doctor what you want to talk about during your visit.
- **Exchange Information** —

play as part of a healthy survival instinct. With time, most people can learn to identify the early signs of a fear episode and manage their symptoms before they develop into full-blown anxiety.

### Types of Anxiety Disorders

- generalized anxiety disorder
- panic disorder
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- social phobia
- obsessive-compulsive disorder
- agoraphobia
- specific phobias

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Make sure you tell the doctor about what's wrong. Printing out an online screening tool (e.g., [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/self-tests](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/self-tests)), or bringing a diary you may have been keeping can help. Make sure to include both physical and emotional symptoms. Sometimes it can help to bring a friend or relative along for support and to help describe your behaviour and symptoms if you're unable to.

- **Participate** — Discuss with your doctor the different ways of handling your health problems. Make sure you understand the positive and negative features about each choice. Ask lots of questions.
- **Agree** — Be sure you and your doctor agree on a treatment plan you can live with.
- **Repeat** — Tell your doctor what you think you will need to do to take care of the problem.

The Anxiety Disorders Association and the BC Mental Health Information Line can also give you a list of possible places for referral that you could suggest to your doctor. If you want to find a new family doctor, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC can provide you with a list of doctors accepting patients in your area.

*Source: Institute for Healthcare Communication P.R.E.P.A.R.E. Patient Education Program*

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