

Your Mental Health - The Big Ones Part Two: Anxiety

As I wrote in the last column, the first two disorders usually discussed when someone speaks about mental health are depression and anxiety. Last time, I covered some basic issues on depression, such as symptoms and treatment. In this column, I will cover anxiety in the same way.

First off, what is anxiety? In general, it is feeling very nervous or worried for most of the day, more days than not. In addition, a person with anxiety will find it very hard to control this worry. These feelings of nervousness and worry are usually associated with feeling restless or on edge, being easily fatigued, having trouble concentrating, feeling very irritable, having lots of muscle tension (such as in your neck or shoulders), and having problems sleeping. Similar to feelings of depression, it is normal for people to have these feelings every once in a while or even for a few days at a time. However, if you have them for longer than a couple of months and they are causing you to feel distressed or have difficulty at work or school, you could be anxious.

So what should you do if you think that you have problems with anxiety? Just like with depression, realize that this is not an uncommon problem. The number of people in the U.S. that have an anxiety disorder is estimated at over 19 million! Annual healthcare costs for anxiety-related problems is over \$42 billion, with many people seeking repeated care because anxiety symptoms can seem like a physical illness. Also, people with anxiety disorders often find themselves becoming ill more easily than others, since having such high levels of stress will often cause your immune system to not work as well as usual.

What steps should you take if you think you have an anxiety problem? A good first step is seeing your regular doctor. Certain types of medication or physical illness can cause problems that are similar to symptoms of anxiety, so ruling out those possibilities should be done first. If there doesn't seem to be another medical cause for your problems, your doctor may either treat the anxiety or refer you to a mental health provider, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, for an evaluation. If it turns out that you are having problems with anxiety, there are several good treatments available.

The use of both medication and psychotherapy has been found to be effective in treating anxiety. The class of medications called benzodiazepines is the most commonly prescribed medication for anxiety, and includes drugs such as Xanax and Valium. While these drugs work well and have few side effects, they can be habit forming and people may become dependent on using them. These drugs should usually be used for short periods, such as several weeks. Many medications used to treat depression, such as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), are also good for treating anxiety. Some common SSRIs include Lexapro, Zoloft, Paxil, and Prozac. These medications do not create the habit forming problems that the benzodiazepines can. As with depression,

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you may have to try several different anti-anxiety medications before you find one that works the best for you.

Depending on your specific symptoms of anxiety, two types of psychotherapy have been shown to be very effective: behavioral therapy (BT) and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Some people may find other types of therapy useful, but for most people BT or CBT will work best. BT helps you to change your reactions to situations or things that cause you anxiety. CBT uses the same methods, and also teaches you how to change the way you think about the things that cause you to feel anxious. Research shows that a combination of medication and therapy works best for most people, although some people may respond better to one or the other by itself.

For more information about anxiety, such as specific types of anxiety disorders, check out the following websites.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/anxietymenu.cfm>

<http://www.adaa.org/>

<http://www.anxietypanic.com/>

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/chapter4/sec2.html>

Next time, I'll talk about the different types of professionals involved in mental health care. Do you have something that you would like to see addressed in a future column, or have comments about this column? Send emails to yourmentalhealth@gmail.com or letters to the Mountain View News.

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