



# TIP SHEET

# Anxiety



## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

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Anxiety is a normal and common emotion that everyone experiences when faced with difficult, new, or challenging situations. Anxiety is a diffuse emotional reaction, which is typically *out of proportion* to threats from the environment. Rather than being focused on real immediate danger, it is usually focused on anticipation of future events, or worrying about the past. For example, you may experience anxiety when worrying ahead of time about how the party will go, and whether you will know anyone when you get there. Or you may experience anxiety when worrying about what you said and how you came across to an acquaintance, with concerns about how they might think of you following the interaction.

## ▼ How Do You Know You Are Feeling Anxious?: Bodily Feelings

The physiological reactions associated with anxiety include:

- Breathing difficulties
- Feeling faint/dizzy
- Dry mouth
- Shakiness
- Pounding heart
- Headaches
- Muscle aches and pains
- Excess sweating
- Increased need for the bathroom!
- 'Lumps' in throat
- Uneasy stomach (butterflies)
- Persistent tiredness

## ▼ Different Types of Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety difficulties may present in different forms. The most common anxiety disorders are:

- *Generalised Anxiety Disorder*: This is characterised by excessive worry and fear about future or past events. This disorder is usually accompanied by somatic symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, vomiting and sleeping problems.
- *Specific Phobia*: This is a fear associated with a specific object or situation. Most common in children is fears of animals or insects, the dark, heights, thunderstorms, needles and other medical and dental procedures.
- *Social Phobia*: This is the marked and persistent fear of social and performance situations where the child is exposed to possible scrutiny or negative evaluation by others. Typically, the individual fears that they will act in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing during social interactions, such as talking in front of a group of people, being the centre of attention, participating in sporting events or meeting new people.
- *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*: This is characterised by the presence of severe anxiety reactions or feelings following a traumatic event, such as witnessing a death, being involved in a near death experience or sexual abuse.
- *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*: This is characterised by intrusive, obsessive thoughts which are usually alleviated by compulsive actions (e.g. washing hands 60 times a day), and checking behaviours (e.g. checking bag 20 times before going to work in case they have forgotten something).
- *Panic Attack*: This is a discrete period in which there is a sudden onset of intense fearfulness or terror, often associated with feelings of impending doom. These feelings are accompanied by physical symptoms such as palpitations, chest pain or discomfort, difficulty breathing and

choking sensations. Evidence suggests this is very rare in children, increasing in prevalence during adolescence and adulthood.

### ▼ How Common are Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety afflicts approximately 10% of adults.

### ▼ Why Do Anxiety Symptoms Begin?

There are usually a combination of causes. Some of these include:

- Physiologically more reactive to novel situations (sensitive emotional nervous system where arousal responses might be triggered more quickly and take a longer time to calm down)
- Exposure to traumatic situations (e.g. painful dental procedures, lightning strikes etc)
- Learning experiences (e.g. modelling from mum or dad)
- Reinforcement of fear responses
- Increased stress levels
- Lack of coping skills
- Use of avoidance

### ▼ What Maintains Anxiety?

Why does anxiety stay with you? What keeps it going? Basically there seems to be two reasons:

1. Because of the way you *behave*, especially because you avoid the situations you fear
2. Because of the *beliefs* you have about the situation and its consequences

### ▼ What Can be Done About it?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy helps individuals to change the thoughts that cause the fears and builds up their coping and problem solving skills. A therapist would teach you how to recognise negative thoughts and to think more positively. These strategies are useful not only for anxiety difficulties but are fundamental skills in building emotional resilience and coping. The therapist would also help you to gradually face the situations/events they have been afraid of in the past. This allows you to discover that your fears usually do not come true, and that you can become less fearful of these situations as a result of facing them. In addition the therapist can teach you how to relax and manage anxious feelings as well as build social skills that can help you to feel more

confident. A number of studies have shown that most individual who receive cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety disorders feel less anxious.

### ▼ What Can I Do?

- ✓ Regularly engage in relaxation activities, such as meditation, reading and physical activity.
- ✓ Gently challenge your thinking by asking questions about the things you are afraid of (e.g. Am I sure this is really going to happen? Am I exaggerating? Is this way of thinking helpful? Is there another way of thinking?)
- ✓ Encourage yourself to face your fears in small *achievable* steps. For example, if you're afraid of travelling by bus, first, learn to manage your panic attacks at home. Then, sit at the bus stop (you may wish to do this step with a support person first, then challenge yourself to do it by yourself). When you feel calm and confident doing this step on your own, encourage yourself to travel one stop on the bus (again, you could use a support person first, then on your own). When you are confident with this, progress to slightly more challenging steps. Be sure to reward yourself with praise and rewards *each* time you achieve these steps! Remember, the number of steps is not important. What is more important is that the steps are small enough to be achievable.
- ✓ Watch out for avoidance behaviour. This is what maintains or continues anxious feelings!

FOR FURTHER HELP: If you have any questions or need further help contact your GP or the number detailed below. Psychologists employed by Queensland Psychology Centre have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and timely service to you in the area of anxiety.

