

# Faculty and Employee Assistance Program Newsletter

## The Many Faces of Anxiety Disorders

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Approximately, 19 million Americans deal with an anxiety disorder\*. Normally we can experience times when we feel anxious or tense. However, if anxiety interferes with daily life, it is not just a case of "nerves". Anxiety disorders are illnesses, often related to the biological makeup and life experiences of the individual, and they frequently run in families.

Many people do not understand these disorders and think individuals should be able to overcome the symptoms by sheer willpower. Wishing the symptoms away does not work - but there are treatments that can help.

There are a variety of treatment options available including several effective medications, as well as, cognitive-behavioral therapy approaches (changing thinking and responses) or psychotherapy. Relaxation and breathing exercises can help in treating anxiety disorders. Usually a combination of medication and therapy create the best results. Prognosis is good for those who seek treatment of anxiety disorders.

### Types of Anxiety Disorders

There are several types of anxiety disorders, each with its own distinct features:

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** consists of chronic and exaggerated worry and tension, even though nothing seems to provoke it. People with GAD (approximately 4 million American adults) tend to anticipate disaster; worry excessively about health, money, family or work. No one source of worry may be apparent\*.

The main symptom of a **panic disorder** is the panic attack itself. As many as 2.4 million American adults, most of whom are women, deal with some phase of panic disorder.\* It can present itself through many physical symptoms, some of which are: fear of losing control or dying, a pounding heartbeat, difficulty breathing or smothering sensation, chest pain or discomfort, lump in the throat, sweatiness and/or nausea. While a person will not die, they often feel as though they will. Panic disorder is treatable through medication and therapy.

**Social anxiety** is the third largest psychological problem in the United States. It affects 5.3 million Americans every year \*. Symptoms vary and apply to most social events and functions in almost every area of life. Some people are severely introverted, others cannot write in public for fear that the shaking of their hands will be noticed. Others have severe anxiety eating or drinking in front of others. Adding to this anxiety is the need to ask for assistance. With education, knowledge and appropriate treatment, however, the socially anxious can have better lives.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** is an anxiety disorder characterized by persistent and repetitive thoughts and behaviors that are often upsetting and disruptive to a person's day-to-day life. The symptoms of OCD may range from mild to severe. Severe OCD may be chronic and disabling. OCD sufferers (3.3 million adult Americans\*) may be plagued with persistent, unwelcome thoughts or images, or by the urgent need to engage in certain rituals (i.e. hand-washing due to germ obsession).

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

After a tragic event, it is likely that some people will experience a variety of symptoms and emotions. Sometimes, however, these symptoms surface several weeks or months after the tragedy. This is called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Recognizing these symptoms in yourself or others is the first step toward recovery and finding appropriate treatment.

## What Can I do if I Think I have an Anxiety Disorder?

First and foremost, educate yourself about the complexities of the disease. Do not be afraid or hesitant to ask for help. Effective treatments for anxiety disorders are available, and research is yielding new, improved therapies that can help most people with anxiety disorders lead productive, fulfilling lives. Approach the subject with your physician. In the interim, schedule an appointment with your Employee Assistance counselor. A trained professional can assist you to design a plan to meet your needs.

\*National Institute of Mental Health, 2002

## Relaxation Exercise: Deep Breathing Technique

- Begin by lying flat on your back or standing up straight. You may also sit up straight in a chair, if that is more comfortable.
- Place your hand on your stomach area.
- Breathe as you normally would and notice whether your hand rises or your chest rises.
- To breathe properly, your stomach area must rise as your diaphragm expands.
- To learn to breathe correctly, begin by slowly breathing in through your nose on the count of 5 while gently pushing your hand up w/ your stomach.
- Hold the breath for a count of 5.
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of five while gently pushing down on your stomach.
- Repeat this process for 5 minutes.
- If the process causes you any uncomfortable feelings, only do it for as long as you are able.
- Increase the length of time each day until you can do the exercise for at least 5 minutes twice daily.
- If you continue to practice breathing this way, you will soon be doing it naturally throughout the day.
- Do not be angry with yourself or give up if you cannot do this exercise correctly right away. Give yourself time. Practice helps.
- Remember, you are in control and can stop any time. Take it slowly.



If you need help with this or other personal issues, please contact the FEAP at (434) 243-2643 or visit our website at <http://uvafeap.com>.

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