



InfoSheet

Panic Disorder Support Group • Fort Lauderdale

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Brief Overview of Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric illnesses affecting both children and adults. They may develop from a complex set of risk factors, including genetics, brain chemistry, personality, and life events. Although they are highly treatable, only about one-third of individuals who present with symptoms seek treatment. The following disorders are part of the category of anxiety disorders. They occur due to an exaggerated or dysfunctional expression of cognitive, physiological and behavioral symptoms of anxiety. Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterized by excessive, unrealistic worry that lasts six months or more; in adults, the anxiety may focus on issues such as health, money, or career. In addition to chronic worry, GAD symptoms include trembling, muscular aches, insomnia, abdominal upsets, dizziness, and irritability. In Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), individuals are plagued by persistent, recurring thoughts (obsessions) that reflect exaggerated anxiety or fears; typical obsessions include worry about being contaminated or fears of behaving improperly or acting violently. The obsessions may lead an individual to perform a ritual or routine (compulsions)-such as washing hands, repeating phrases or hoarding-to relieve the anxiety caused by the obsession. People with Panic Disorder (PD) suffer severe attacks of panic-which may make them feel like they are having a heart attack or are going crazy-for no apparent reason. Symptoms include heart palpitations, chest pain or discomfort, sweating, trembling, tingling sensations, feeling of choking, fear of dying, fear of losing control, and feelings of unreality. Panic disorder often occurs with agoraphobia, in which people are afraid of having a panic attack in a place from which escape would



be difficult, so they avoid these places. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can follow an exposure to a traumatic event such as a sexual or physical assault, witnessing a death, the unexpected death of a loved one, or natural disaster. There are three main symptoms associated with PTSD: "re-living" of the traumatic event (such as flashbacks and nightmares); avoidance behaviors (such as avoiding places related to the trauma) and emotional numbing (detachment from others); and physiological arousal such difficulty sleeping, irritability or poor concentration. Social Phobia or Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is characterized by extreme anxiety about being judged by others or behaving in a way that might cause embarrassment or ridicule. This intense anxiety may lead to avoidance behavior. Physical symptoms associated with this disorder include heart palpitations, faintness, blushing and profuse sweating. People with specific phobias (SP) suffer from an intense fear reaction to a specific object or situation (such as spiders, dogs, or heights); the level of fear is usually inappropriate to the situation, and is recognized by the sufferer as being irrational.

This inordinate fear can lead to the avoidance of common, everyday situations. Anxiety disorders are highly treatable with psychosocial therapies, medication, or both. Psycho-social treatments used in the treatment of anxiety disorders include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, anxiety management and relaxation therapies, and psychotherapy. Drugs used to treat anxiety disorders include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), tricyclic antidepressants, benzodiazepines, beta blockers, and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs). Combination therapies are often utilized.