



Anxiety Disorders

It is normal to feel stressed and anxious in college. Between exams, roommates, and your social life, it is hard to find time to relax. However, sometimes students experience more extreme forms of fear, worrying, and even panic that may be signs of an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are more common than you probably think. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, more than 40 million American adults are affected by anxiety disorders each year.¹

So how do you know when it's more than just stress? People with anxiety disorders may experience a variety of symptoms, including:

- Excessive (and often irrational) worry
- Tension and irritability
- Fear surrounding certain situations
- Physical symptoms, including headaches, digestive problems and muscle tension
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Increase in avoidant behaviors, like drinking or drug use, or social withdrawal

These disorders can arise suddenly, and the feelings of anxiety can happen over and over again. The good news is that treatment is available. The earlier you get help, the sooner you can get some relief.

While there are a number of anxiety disorders, some of the more common disorders are described below, along with personal testimonials.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder is continual, extreme worry and tension. Usually this intense worry is accompanied by other symptoms, like fatigue, headaches and muscle tension. Sometimes the source of the worry is hard to identify specifically and instead takes the form of a constant feeling of dread.

"I'd have terrible sleeping problems. There were times I'd wake up wired in the middle of the night. I had trouble concentrating, even reading the newspaper or a novel. Sometimes I'd feel a little lightheaded. My heart would race or pound. And that would make me worry more. I was always imagining things were worse than they really were: when I got a stomachache, I'd think it was an ulcer."²

Panic Disorder is when someone experiences repeated panic attacks. These attacks include feelings of terror combined with physical symptoms such as a pounding heart, chest pain, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, numbness and fear of dying. Panic attacks happen fast and appear out of the blue. There is usually no logical or visible cause for these attacks, although they can have certain triggers.





back to campus

"For me, a panic attack is almost a violent experience. I feel disconnected from reality. I feel like I'm losing control in a very extreme way. My heart pounds really hard, I feel like I can't get my breath, and there's an overwhelming feeling that things are crashing in on me." ²

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is marked by obsessions – repeated, upsetting thoughts and images – that a person cannot control. To combat these images and thoughts and ease anxiety, a person with OCD spends time in repetitive rituals, called compulsions, such as hand washing or checking and re-checking door locks. This complex disorder can take many forms.

"Getting dressed in the morning was tough, because I had a routine, and if I didn't follow the routine, I'd get anxious and would have to get dressed again. I always worried that if I didn't do something, my parents were going to die. I'd have these terrible thoughts of harming my parents. That was completely irrational, but the thoughts triggered more anxiety and more senseless behavior. Because of the time I spent on rituals, I was unable to do a lot of things that were important to me." ²

Phobias occur when someone feels intense fear about a certain situation or event that is out of proportion to the actual harm possible. For example, claustrophobia, the fear of confined spaces, and acrophobia, the fear of heights, are common phobias. These disorders are serious and interfere with everyday life, as the person may avoid the situations or objects that cause the fear. It is important to differentiate a phobia from general nervousness about public speaking, riding in elevators, or being in large crowds, for example. Here is one woman's experience with social phobia, a common form of this disorder:

"In any social situation, I felt fear. I would be anxious before I even left the house, and it would escalate as I got closer to a college class, a party, or whatever. I would feel sick in my stomach-it almost felt like I had the flu. My heart would pound, my palms would get sweaty, and I would get this feeling of being removed from myself and from everybody else." ²

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can happen after a person experiences or witnesses a traumatic event, such as military combat, a serious accident or sexual assault. Symptoms include repeatedly thinking about the trauma, being constantly alert or on guard, and avoiding reminders of the trauma.

"Then I started having flashbacks. They kind of came over me like a splash of water. I would be terrified. Suddenly I was reliving the rape. Every instant was startling. I wasn't aware of anything around me, I was in a bubble, just kind of floating. And it was scary. Having a flashback can wring you out." ²





back to campus

Getting Help

If left untreated, an anxiety disorder can interfere with your schoolwork, social life and everyday activities. It can also lead to depression, and the disorders often happen at the same time. You should know that anxiety disorders are treatable and with help, you can feel better. To find help or get more information about anxiety disorders, start with your student health center or counseling service on campus. Most colleges provide limited free mental health services and can refer you to local providers for longer-term treatment. You can also contact your local Mental Health America affiliate or Mental Health America at 800-969-6642. If you ever feel so overwhelmed with your anxiety that you think about hurting yourself, call 1-800-273-TALK to speak with someone who can help you.

Additional Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA)

Phone: (240) 485-1001

www.adaa.org

Freedom From Fear

Phone: (718) 351-1717

www.freedomfromfear.org

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Phone: (866) 615-6464

www.nimh.nih.gov

Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation

Phone: (203) 401-2070

www.ocfoundation.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS)

Phone: (800)-789-2647

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/>

¹ Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Walters EE. Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2005 Jun;62(6):617-27.

² National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Anxiety Disorder. Revised 2006.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/anxiety.cfm#1>

