

EAP Educates: Anxiety and Panic Attacks

Anxiety

Some degree of anxiety in our lives is perfectly normal. If you are feeling anxious heading into an interview, or confronting someone on an issue that is troubling you, or meeting a person for the first time, this is to be expected. Anxiety is our natural response to fear. It is automatic and an alarm bell goes off if you feel threatened. Anxiety can in fact be productive. If you find that you can no longer function adequately, that your anxiety is constant and overwhelming, then you may need assistance in managing that anxiety.

Anxiety disorders come in many different forms and can vary enormously from one person to another. They all, however, share the following: ***the sufferer experiences a persistent or severe fear or worry in situations that most other people would not find threatening.*** These symptoms become a problem when they occur without any recognizable stimulus or when the stimulus does not warrant such a reaction. In other words, inappropriate anxiety is when a person's heart races, breathing increases, and muscles tense without any reason for them to do so. Once a medical cause is ruled out, an anxiety disorder may be the culprit.

Symptoms associated with anxiety

There are various symptoms associated with anxiety and these can be split into emotional and physical symptoms.

Emotional Symptoms of Anxiety include

Feelings of apprehension or dread	Trouble Concentrating
Feeling tense and jumpy	Anticipating the worst
Irritability	Restlessness
Watching for signs of danger	Feeling like your mind's gone blank

Physical Symptoms of Anxiety include

Pounding heart	Sweating
Upset stomach or dizziness	Frequent urination or diarrhoea
Shortness of breath	Tremors and twitches
Headaches	Muscle tension
Fatigue	Insomnia

Panic attacks

A panic attack is an episode of intense panic or fear. They usually come on suddenly with little or no warning. In some cases, the trigger is clear, and in others, they seem to come out of the blue. They usually peak at about 10 minutes and seldom last longer than 30 minutes, but the terror can be such, that the person experiencing the attack believes they are going to lose control or even die. Many people who experience panic attacks believe they are having a heart attack, and this in itself, just gives them further cause for concern.

Symptoms of Panic Attacks

Surge of overwhelming panic	Feeling of losing control or going crazy
Heart palpitations or chest pain	Feeling like you're going to pass out
Trouble breathing for choking sensation	Hyperventilation
Hot Flashes or chills	Trembling or shaking
Nausea or stomach cramps	Feeling detached or unreal

What can you do if you are suffering the negative effects of anxiety or experience panic attacks?

There are many reasons for people to worry. Even if you are a person who worries more than some, it does not necessarily mean you are suffering from an anxiety disorder. Your schedule, lack of exercise or sleep or pressure at home could all be contributing factors. It is important to realise though, that if your lifestyle is stressed and unhealthy, your anxiety levels are likely to be elevated.

If you feel that you are worrying too much, evaluate your current situation and take time to ensure that you are caring for yourself. If your stress levels are too high, look at things you can do to bring your life into better balance.

- Do you make time each day to have some fun?
- Do you have the emotional support you need?
- Are you looking after yourself physically?
- Do you have more responsibilities than you are able to handle?
- If you need help, do you ask for it?

Self-help for panic attacks and anxiety disorders:

Many people recover from panic attacks and anxiety on their own. Below are some tips to assist you.

- The first thing to do is to unclutter your life. Choose important activities and let go of the rest.
- Challenge negative thoughts
 - Write down your worries
 - Create an anxiety / worry period each day – give yourself 10 minutes to focus on your worries. Anything that crops up during the day, you can add to a list and then think about it in your dedicated worry time.
 - Accept uncertainty
- Take care of yourself
 - Practise relaxation techniques
 - Adopt healthy eating habits
 - Reduce alcohol, nicotine and caffeine intake
 - Exercise regularly
 - Get enough sleep

Professional assistance

People who don't recover on their own could benefit greatly from getting professional assistance. This could be through counselling where one can learn about anxiety and panic attacks, identify underlying difficulties and triggers, and work through self-help skills. Some people might need psychotherapy and possible medication.

If you need assistance in working through your concerns, contact your EAP. Just talking about your worries can make them seem less frightening.