



# *Anxiety and Chronic Pain or Illness*

## *Introduction*

The strain of living with chronic pain or other chronic symptoms often triggers anxiety. You may worry that chronic symptoms signal a serious or disabling disease. You may feel that you have lost control over your health and life, which can increase anxiety. Other typical concerns include worsening symptoms, possible injury, and changes in job status, finances or relationships.

Anxiety can leave you tense, scared, upset or nervous. It can adversely affect your interaction with family and friends, your productivity at work and the overall quality of life. Anxiety can become so distressing that it keeps you from doing what you want or need to do.

Perhaps you cannot change your circumstances, but you can choose how you respond. This information discusses thoughts and behaviors that can prolong or intensify anxiety, and suggests how to face challenges in positive, healthy ways.

If you have questions about this information, talk to your health care provider.

## *What Is Anxiety?*

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. Anxiety can arise when you perceive a possible threat or unpleasant situation. For example, you may become anxious when a major project is due at work, a child is late coming home from school, or a family member is ill.

We all experience anxiety. Responses to anxiety differ, but may include:

- Muscle tension.
- Headache, stomachache.
- Sweating.
- Increased heart and breathing rates.
- Feeling scared, restless, nervous, keyed up, or on edge.
- Irritability, crankiness, impatience.
- Sleep problems.
- Fatigue.
- Difficulty concentrating.

Typically, anxiety goes away after a crisis or challenge is resolved. Your body and mind return to normal, and you have a chance to regain strength and energy for future challenges.

# Anxiety Problems

A moderate amount of anxiety can be good, such as when it helps you respond to real danger or motivates you to perform well at work and home. But too much anxiety is not helpful. If you feel nervous, scared or upset more often or more intensely than normal, you may have an anxiety problem.

For example, you might worry about danger that does not exist and become anxious when, actually, you are safe, such as visiting the dentist. You might worry about events that are unlikely to occur, such as fainting while giving a speech. You might overreact or be overly concerned about an event, such as worrying that others will view you as a failure if you make a mistake. Or, you might continue to dwell on a stressful situation after it ends, such as repeatedly replaying in your mind an argument with your spouse.

Excessive or long-lasting anxiety can leave you physically and mentally exhausted. It is associated with some health problems, such as digestive disorders, chronic headaches, ulcers and high blood pressure. High levels of anxiety can negatively affect your ability to perform tasks, and your mood, relationships and enjoyment of life. Anxiety increases the intensity of chronic pain and makes coping with chronic symptoms harder.

## **Anxiety disorders**

If worry or distress preoccupy your life and actions, you may have an anxiety disorder.

Examples include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)** — ongoing, full-time worry and the sense that something bad is about to happen, even when there's no apparent danger.
- **Phobia** — excessive, unreasonable fear of an object or situation.
- **Panic disorder** — feelings of terror that arise suddenly and often, for no apparent reason.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** — repeated, unwanted thoughts, ideas, images or impulses (obsessions), and repetitive behaviors or rituals (compulsions) performed to cope with obsessions.

If controlling your worry and stress is nearly impossible, or if anxiety interferes with your daily functioning, consult your primary care physician or a mental health professional. Effective treatment for anxiety disorders is available.

# Causes of Anxiety Problems

Why some people struggle more than others with anxiety isn't fully understood. Many factors, including personality, genetics, biology and life experiences, likely work together.

- **Certain personality traits** — People with low self-esteem and poor coping skills are prone to anxiety problems. Other traits — such as extreme shyness, perfectionism and excessive need for approval or control — also can create or aggravate anxiety.
- **Genetics** — Genetic factors may affect the development of personality traits. In addition, a family history of anxiety or depression appears to increase the chance of developing an anxiety disorder.
- **Biology** — Problems with brain chemicals that send nerve impulses from cell to cell (neurotransmitters) may play a role in a person's anxiety level.

- **Learning and life experiences** — Some anxiety problems may result from learned ways of thinking and behaving. For example, excessive anxiety might develop from an unpleasant experience, such as a dog bite, or from watching another person's anxious response to a situation, such as seeing a parent's fear of heights.
- **Other factors** — Anxiety is associated with certain physical illnesses (for example, thyroid disease and hypoglycemia [low blood sugar]). Excessive stress also may trigger anxiety problems. A stressful event that significantly changes one's life (for example, the loss of a loved one) can produce overwhelming anxiety, as can stressors that are long-lasting or occur one after the other (for example, a troubled marriage followed by divorce).

## *Anxiety and Chronic Symptoms*

The way you cope with a chronic condition affects your stress level and sense of control over life. If you often feel stressed or helpless, you are likely to remain anxious and fearful. Certain behavior and thinking patterns are especially likely to produce stress and, thus, fuel excessive, ongoing worry.

### **Behavior**

Some people try to manage chronic symptoms by staying away from troubling objects or situations (avoidance). Others act in ways they hope will prevent or minimize a negative outcome (safety-seeking behavior).

Thus, you might quit your job or decline an invitation to a picnic because you fear the physical activity will increase your pain and fatigue. Or, if you worry that chronic symptoms will impair job performance, you might stop doing household tasks to save your energy for the workplace.

Avoidance and safety-seeking may seem helpful and calming at first. But, over time, they increase the focus on symptoms and worsen anxiety. The more you dwell on fears and worries without facing them, the worse they can seem and the more anxious you may become.

These behavior patterns also tend to confirm rather than disprove worries and fears. Your actions keep you from gaining skills to combat anxiety. For example, if you remain in bed or avoid activity on difficult days, you never have the chance to learn that coping techniques, such as moderation and relaxation, can help you stay active despite pain. Instead, you remain convinced that bed rest is the only way to avoid uncontrolled pain.

Or, if you overdo at work rather than using moderation skills, you might have increased pain and be unable to work the next day. This falsely confirms your (or your boss's) fear that a chronic condition guarantees reduced productivity.

### **Thoughts**

The way you think about yourself and your life can heighten anxiety. Negative or inaccurate thinking can cause much distress and leave you feeling helpless and afraid to face challenges.

Patterns of negative or inaccurate thinking that can worsen anxiety include:

- **Catastrophizing** — always expecting the worst, or magnifying the negative aspects of a situation. For example, you assume that managing chronic symptoms will greatly reduce quality of life, and tell yourself, "I can't take this anymore" or "Pain has ruined my life" or "I can't go out with friends. If my pain acts up, everything will be ruined." Given such beliefs, it seems natural to view a chronic condition as a catastrophe or disaster.

- **Filtering** — focusing only on negative aspects of situations while filtering out all positive aspects; watching for information that supports your worries and ignoring evidence that disproves the significance of a threat or your ability to cope. For example, focusing only on what pain prevents you from doing rather than on your strengths and abilities.
- **Personalizing** — blaming yourself for anything unpleasant; thinking that everything people do or say is a reaction to you. For example, you think an event was canceled because no one wanted to be with you. Or, you assume others will think less of you if you moderate your activity level at home or work.
- **All-or-nothing thinking** — seeing things as either all good or all bad; allowing no middle ground; feeling that you must be perfect or you're a failure. For example, you believe that chronic symptoms can arise only from serious illness. Or you are certain that, if you cannot eliminate all symptoms, you will not enjoy any activities.
- **Should statements** — having a set of ironclad rules about how you and others must or ought to act; feeling guilty if you break the rules and angry or resentful if others do. For example, you tell yourself you should still be able to do everything you did before pain affected your life.
- **Mistaking feelings for facts** — believing that what you feel must be true, or that you must look the way you feel. For example, if you feel stupid and boring, then you must be stupid and boring. Or, if you feel anxious, others view you that way.
- **Spontaneous negative images** — having frequent mental images of situations or outcomes that you fear. For example, you continually imagine yourself in pain after physical activity, thus increasing anxiety about exercise or other activity.

Fortunately, you can take steps to replace unhelpful behavior and thinking patterns with constructive actions and a positive, realistic attitude. This can help minimize anxiety and improve how you manage unpleasant situations.

## *Managing Anxiety*

Living with a chronic condition can be stressful, so it's normal to feel anxious at times. But if anxiety disrupts your life, taking action is important. These suggestions may help you control anxiety in positive, healthy ways:

- **Identify your anxiety triggers.** Determine what's making you anxious and address it. For example, if the thought of regular physical activity worries you, ask your health care provider or an athletic trainer to help you create a safe exercise program.
- **Look for patterns in your coping strategies.** Track your responses to stressors for a week. For example, do you tense up at the first sign of trouble? Do you get impatient or angry? Do you let negative thoughts take over? Do you just give up? Once you identify how you cope with stressful situations, you can begin to think about alternative strategies.
- **Challenge negative thinking and behavior.** Challenge negative thoughts with more positive, realistic and encouraging statements. Recall times when you have successfully coped with troubling situations. Focus on your abilities, not on what you cannot do.
- **Use distraction.** When you feel anxious, take a walk or engage in a hobby to refocus your mind away from your worries.
- **Use time management skills.** Effectively managing your time can help you feel more in control and less helpless. Create a daily plan of tasks and goals you hope to accomplish. Focus on what's most important. Work at a moderate pace and take breaks when needed.
- **Take time out.** When you feel stressed, take several slow, deep breaths and tell yourself, "This will pass" or "I can get through this situation."
- **Set aside "worry time."** Schedule 15 minutes daily to focus on your concerns and then put them aside.

- **Stay active and connected.** Don't withdraw from activities and isolate yourself at home. Don't let worries keep you away from loved ones. Use moderation and modification skills to remain active and socially connected while reducing chronic symptoms.
- **Talk to someone.** Share your problems with a friend or family member. Talking to others can provide support and offers a healthy diversion. Explore support groups in your area.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get the sleep you need, eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and take time to relax. Avoid caffeine and nicotine, which can worsen anxiety. Don't turn to alcohol or recreational drugs for relief.
- **Stay positive.** Find ways to put a positive spin on negative thoughts or unpleasant situations. Try to view difficult circumstances as challenges to be managed rather than disasters. Respond with affirmations of what's good about yourself. Look for humor, even in tough situations.
- **Consider counseling.** Some forms of counseling are aimed at changing unhealthy thoughts and behaviors that contribute to anxiety. Others explore underlying stressors that may trigger anxiety. Ask your health care provider for more information.
- **Take medication as directed.** In some cases, antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications or both may be used with counseling for anxiety management. If medication is prescribed for you, take it as directed. Do not change your dose or stop taking your medication without your health care provider's permission.

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