Anxiety, Panic and Other Disorders

Anxiety, panic and other disorders such as agoraphobia, social phobia, compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder are all very serious illnesses. Not only are they serious, but they are also very common. Many of these illnesses affect thousands, if not millions, of Americans every year. It is important to understand more about the illnesses to see if they are playing a part in your life. If you believe there may be evidence that you are a victim of one of these illnesses, then it is imperative that you see a health care professional for a correct diagnosis and proper treatment.

For more information about the following disorders, click on the items below:

- General anxiety disorder
- Panic disorder
- Social phobia

For more information, or if you have additional questions, please call the Methodist Assistance Program at 317.962.2622, ext. 2 or 800.745.4838, ext. 2.

Publications and other information are also available online from the helpguide.org.
General Anxiety Disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterized by six months or more of chronic, exaggerated worry and tension that is unfounded or much more severe than the normal anxiety most people experience. People with this disorder usually expect the worst. They worry excessively about money, health, family or work, even when there are no signs of trouble. They are unable to relax and often suffer from insomnia. Many people with GAD also have physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headaches, irritability or hot flashes.

Fortunately, through research supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), effective treatments have been developed to help people with GAD.

How Common Is GAD?
About 2.8 percent of the adult U.S. population ages 18 to 54 - approximately four million Americans - will have GAD during the course of a given year. GAD most often strikes people in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood, too. It affects women more often than men.

What Causes GAD?
Some research suggests that GAD may run in families and it may also grow worse during stress. GAD usually begins at an earlier age and symptoms may manifest themselves more slowly than in most other anxiety disorders.

What Treatments Are Available for GAD?
Treatments for GAD include medication and cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Can People with GAD Also Have Other Illnesses?
Research shows that GAD often coexists with depression, substance abuse or other anxiety disorders. Other conditions associated with stress, such as irritable bowel syndrome, often accompany GAD. Patients with physical symptoms such as insomnia or headaches should also tell their doctors about their feelings of worry and tension. This will help the patient's healthcare provider recognize that the person is suffering from GAD.
Panic Disorder

Panic disorder is an illness. It is much more significant than feeling a little anxious or agitated every once in a while. Everyone experiences life events that make us a little nervous, scared or agitated. However, these feelings usually do not persist, reoccur and do not interfere with the ability to function in other areas of our lives.

Panic disorder is an illness that is characterized by one or more panic attacks or periods of intense fear and discomfort. These attacks do not occur in situations that would normally cause anxiety. The following symptoms may also be present during the attacks:

1. Shortness of breath or feeling like you cannot breathe
2. Feelings of dizziness or faintness
3. Accelerated heart rate, feeling that your heart is "racing"
4. Shakiness or trembling
5. Sweating
6. Nausea or abdominal distress
7. Depersonalization—feeling like you are not really in the situation
8. Hot flashes or chills
9. Fear of dying
10. Fear of "going crazy" or feeling out of control

In panic disorder, the panic attacks and their symptoms are caused by an organic factor such as caffeine, a thyroid problem or other body illness, or the ingestion of drugs such as amphetamines. Panic disorder can also be characterized by avoidance of situations such as social situations.

Panic disorder is a treatable illness. It is not a weakness or character fault. It is often treated using anxiolytic therapy and psychotherapy or a combination of both.

One can receive therapy for anxiety or panic attacks in a variety of ways. Anxiolytic therapy is medication that is taken by the individual to control the symptoms of the panic attacks.

Psychotherapy is treatment with a counselor or mental health therapist. This is often instrumental in helping the individual suffering from panic disorder with the social factors that may be contributing to the illness. It is important to seek professional help. With this help, it is possible to recover.
Social Phobia
Social phobia, also called social anxiety, is a disorder characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social situations. People with social phobia have a persistent, intense and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and of being embarrassed or humiliated by their own actions. Their fear may be so severe that it interferes with work or school and other ordinary activities. While many people with social phobia recognize that their fear of being around people may be excessive or unreasonable, they are unable to overcome it. They often worry for days or weeks in advance of a dreaded situation.

Social phobia can be limited to only one type of situation, such as a fear of speaking in formal or informal situations, or eating and drinking in front of others. In its most severe form, a person may experience symptoms almost any time they are around other people. Social phobia can be very debilitating. It may even keep people from going to work or school on occasion. Many people with this illness have a hard time making and keeping friends.

Physical symptoms often accompany the intense anxiety of social phobia and include blushing, profuse sweating, trembling and other symptoms of anxiety, including difficulty talking, nausea or other stomach discomfort. These visible symptoms heighten the fear of disapproval and the symptoms themselves can become an additional focus of fear. Fear of symptoms can create a vicious cycle: as people with social phobia worry about experiencing the symptoms, the greater their chances of developing the symptoms.

Social phobia often runs in families and may be accompanied by depression or alcohol dependence.

How Common Is Social Phobia?
About 3.7 percent of the U.S. population ages 18 to 54 - approximately 5.3 million Americans - has social phobia in any given year. Social phobia occurs in women twice as often as in men, although a higher proportion of men seeks help for this disorder. The disorder typically begins in childhood or early adolescence and rarely develops after age 25.

What Causes Social Phobia?
Research to determine causes of social phobia is ongoing. Some investigations implicate a small structure in the brain called the amygdala in the symptoms of social phobia. The amygdala is believed to be a central site in the brain that controls fear responses.

Animal studies are adding to the evidence that suggests social phobia can be inherited. In fact, researchers supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) recently identified the site of a gene in mice that affects learned fearfulness.

One line of research is investigating a biochemical basis for the disorder. Scientists are exploring the idea that heightened sensitivity to disapproval may be physiologically or hormonally based.

Other researchers are investigating the environment's influence on the development of social phobia. People with social phobia may acquire their fear from observing the behavior and consequences of others, a process called observational learning or social modeling.

What Treatments Are Available for Social Phobia?
Research supported by NIMH and by the industry has shown that there are two effective forms of treatment available for social phobia: certain medications and a specific form of short-term psychotherapy called cognitive-behavioral therapy. Medications include antidepressants such as selective serotonin
reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), as well as drugs known as high-potency benzodiazepenes. Some people with a form of social phobia called performance phobia have been helped by beta-blockers, which are more commonly used to control high blood pressure.

Cognitive-behavior therapy is also very useful. The central component of this treatment is exposure therapy, which involves helping patients gradually become more comfortable with situations that frighten them. The exposure process often involves three stages. The first involves introducing people to the feared situation. The second stage is to increase the risk for disapproval in that situation so people build confidence to be able to handle rejection or criticism. The third stage involves teaching people techniques to cope with disapproval. In this stage, people imagine their worst fear and are encouraged to develop constructive responses to their fear and perceived disapproval.

Cognitive-behavior therapy for social phobia also includes anxiety management training. This would include, for example, teaching people techniques such as deep breathing to control their levels of anxiety. Another important aspect of treatment is called cognitive restructuring, which involves helping individuals identify their misjudgments and develop more realistic expectations of the likelihood of danger in social situations.

Supportive therapy such as group therapy, couples therapy or family therapy to educate significant others about the disorder is also helpful. Sometimes people with social phobia also benefit from social skills training.

**What Other Illnesses Co-Occur with Social Phobia?**
Social phobia can cause lowered self-esteem and depression. In trying to reduce their anxiety and alleviate depression, people with social phobia may use alcohol or other drugs, which can lead to addiction.

Some people with social phobia may have other anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder.