

# Anxiety Disorders

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Anxiety Disorders – the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders.

The diagnosis of mental health disorders involves an evaluation or assessment of the individual's symptoms and the episodes of the symptoms. Symptoms are usually self-reported, behavior reported by relatives and others, and may include feeling sad, hopeless, useless, angry, and lonely. Screening tools are often used to help identify these symptoms. Episodes usually refer to the duration, intensity and occurrence of the period of symptoms. Terms commonly associated with episodes are single, recurring, mild, moderate and acute.

Most people experience feelings of anxiety before an important event such as a big exam, business presentation or first date. Anxiety disorders, however, are illnesses that cause people to feel frightened, distressed and uneasy for no apparent reason. Left untreated, these disorders can dramatically reduce productivity and significantly diminish an individual's quality of life. Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental illnesses in America; more than 40 million are affected by these debilitating illnesses each year.

A brief description of Anxiety orders is provided below:

Panic disorder is characterized by unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress. It is characterized by sudden attacks of

terror, usually accompanied by a pounding heart, sweatiness, weakness, faintness, or dizziness. Panic disorder affects about 6 million American adults and is twice as common in women as men. Panic attacks often begin in late adolescence or early adulthood, but not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder (National Institute of Mental Health).

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, OCD, is characterized by recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors (compulsions). Repetitive behaviors such as handwashing, counting, checking, or cleaning are often performed with the hope of preventing obsessive thoughts or making them go away. OCD affects about 2.2 million American adults, and the problem can be accompanied by eating disorders, other anxiety disorders, or depression. It strikes men and women in roughly equal numbers and usually appears in childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood.

Posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is a serious potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war, violent personal assault such as rape, or other life-threatening events. Most people who experience such events recover from them, but people with PTSD continue to be severely depressed and anxious for months or even years following the event. Women are twice as likely to develop posttraumatic stress disorder as men, 7.7 million Americans age 18 and older have PTSD.

Phobia is an extreme, disabling and irrational fear of something that really poses little or no actual danger; the fear leads to avoidance of objects or situations and can cause people to limit their lives.

There are three main groups of phobias which include:

Agoraphobia causes people to suffer anxiety about being in places or situations from which it might be difficult or embarrassing to escape--such as being in a room full of people or in an elevator.

Specific Or Simple Phobias produce intense fear of a particular object or situation that is, in fact, relatively safe. People who suffer from specific phobias are aware that their fear is irrational, but the thought of facing the object or situation often brings on a panic attack or severe anxiety.

Social Phobia can produce fear of being humiliated or embarrassed in front of other people. This problem may also be related to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem, and can drive a person to drop out of school, avoid making friends, and remain unemployed.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterized by chronic, exaggerated worry about everyday routine life events and activities, lasting at least six months; almost always anticipating the worst even though there is little reason to expect it. GAD affects about 6.8 million American adults, including twice as many women as men. The disorder develops gradually and can begin at any point in the life cycle, although the years of highest risk are between childhood and middle age.

More information about anxiety disorders can be found at the below listed websites which were use as a resource for today's column.

<http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>  
<http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder>  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/information/get-info/anxiety-disorders>  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>

November is Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month and my next column will focus on Alzheimer's Disease.

*By Shem Heller, Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Lebanon County*