

# KINDRED

63 Victoria Street    Tel: 292 3456  
Hamilton HM 12    kindredbda@gmail.com

## **Kindred Anxiety Disorders Information Factsheet**

### **What are anxiety disorders?**

The experience of anxiety is a normal human emotion when it is at a level appropriate to the stress of the situation. When an anxiety disorder is present, the level of anxiety experienced by the person is abnormally high, is experienced as unpleasant, recognised as irrational, and is handicapping due to the severity of the symptoms and avoidance of situations that are the focus of the anxiety. In 1908 Yerkes and Dodson described the relationship between anxiety and performance: task-related performance improves as one becomes aroused and thus anxiety is initially performance enhancing. This performance increment peaks once the person is alert and further increases in the anxiety level beyond this optimal level impairs performance.

The human autonomic nervous system reaction to perceived threats is known as 'flight or fight.' This automatic response releases stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol that facilitate urgent action. When there is something to be scared of, e.g. a tiger, we call this fear. When no immediate external threat is visible - we don't see any tigers - we call this anxiety. Our brain's search for the source of the threat usually then focuses internally on a part of the body reacting to the fight-or-flight response such as chest tightness caused by increased muscle tone thereby triggering the automatic worry that we are having a heart attack or other physiological catastrophe. We fear that we are about to have a heart attack, collapse, faint, lose control of our bladder or bowel, go crazy, or die. A positive feedback loop is then created between the body and mind which results in a panic attack.

The mental symptoms of anxiety can include racing thoughts, uncontrollable over-thinking, a narrowing of attention, difficulties concentrating, feelings of dread, panic or 'impending doom', wanting to escape from the situation you are in, and feeling like you are not connected to your own body (dissociation). Physical symptoms of anxiety are due to increased circulation (experienced as palpitations) with shift of blood from gut to muscles (experienced as dry mouth, nausea, abdominal distress); increased respiratory drive (experienced as difficulty breathing or feelings of choking, and then – if the person hyperventilates – numbness and tingling, dizziness, light-headedness, and chest discomfort); increased muscle tension (experienced as trembling and shaking, muscle tightness and pain). Other symptoms include sweating, hot flushes or blushing, and extreme tiredness once the anxiety symptoms subside. Not everyone who has an anxiety disorder will experience the same symptoms and many individuals will focus on a particular part of their body.

The seriousness of anxiety disorders is frequently underestimated because anxiety is a normal emotion, when present to an appropriate degree, and the symptoms are frequently experienced internally with few signs visible to the observer. Patients with anxiety disorders suffer considerably from the debilitating effects of their excessive anxiety, for it impairs their work and personal relationships, and limits their activities and opportunities.

## What are the treatments for anxiety disorders?

The good news is that there are effective treatments for anxiety disorders: numerous self-help strategies, talking therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and medication.

### 1. Self-help strategies.

There are a number of very useful free apps that can be downloaded to your cell phone such as Headspace, Insight Timer, Calm, Dare, Rootd and SAM. These provide information about anxiety, guided meditations, breathing exercises and anxiety-management techniques. Meditation is free, easy and effective for managing anxiety, insomnia and unwanted thoughts and feelings.

### 2. Distraction

Distraction can also be helpful for managing anxiety: do something, preferably exercise. This can also be achieved internally by visualising a 'happy place,' e.g. with your family, that you visit in your mind's eye at times of increased anxiety.

### 3. Slow-breathing technique

This technique is to be used at the first signs of anxiety or panic:

- i) Stop what you are doing and sit down or lean against something.
- ii) Hold your breath and count to 10.
- iii) Breathe out and mentally say the word 'relax' to yourself.
- iv) Breathe in and out slowly in a six-second cycle: breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. Mentally say the word 'relax' to yourself every time you breathe out.
- v) At the end of each minute (after 10 breaths), hold your breath again for 10 seconds, and then continue breathing in the six-second cycle.
- vi) If you continue breathing in this way the symptoms should subside within a minute or two. The more you practice, the better you will become at using it to bring your anxiety under control. Your goal should always be to stay calm and prevent the anxiety and fear from developing into panic.

### 4. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques

CBT focuses on challenging and changing unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors to improve emotional regulation. CBT is a problem-focused and action-oriented form of therapy that is used to treat specific symptoms related to a diagnosed mental disorder. CBT and medication are both effective for treating anxiety disorders and research suggests that CBT is most effective when combined with medication for treating mental disorders that are present to a severe degree. A basic concept in CBT is

exposure. This term refers to the direct confrontation of feared objects, activities, or situations. Through exposure to the stimulus, the harmful conditioned anxiety response can be extinguished.

## 5. Medication

There are a number of medications that are safe and effective in the management of anxiety disorders including:

- i) Propranolol. This is a blood pressure medication that blocks the body's beta-adrenoceptors response to the adrenaline released by the fight-or-flight response. It is well tolerated except by those who have naturally low blood pressure and are prone to fainting, athletes who have a very low heart rate and people with asthma. It can be taken every day or prior to an anxiety-inducing task e.g. public speaking. It is non-addictive, non-sedating and non-fattening.
- ii) SSRI antidepressants. These are highly effective and well tolerated first-line treatment for anxiety disorders. See the Kindred Antidepressant Info Factsheet for detailed information. Many people with longstanding anxiety take these medications on a life-long basis.
- iii) Benzodiazepines. These medications are highly effective for anxiety in the short term but they are extremely addictive and in the longer term usually end up causing more problems than they solve due to tolerance and withdrawal symptoms. They should be reserved for short term use in exceptional or emergency situations.
- iv) Others. Second line options include other antidepressants, antipsychotics, antihistamines and the serotonergic medication Buspirone.