

Treating Stress and Anxiety Disorders in Adults

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All of us experience stress in our everyday lives. Stress is the body's reaction to an event that is experienced as disturbing or threatening. Our primitive ancestors experienced stress when they had to fight off wild animals and other threats to their survival. Now, in the contemporary world, we are more likely to feel stressed when we face overwhelming responsibilities at work or home, experience loneliness, rejection, or the fear of losing things that are important to us such as our jobs or friends. When we are exposed to such events, we experience what has been called the "fight or flight" response. To prepare for fight or flight, the body increases its heart rate and blood pressure. This sends more blood to our heart and muscles, our respiration rate increases, and we become vigilant and tense. Our bodies are on full alert which allows us to take action.

However, when stress continues over a long period of time and significantly impacts how we live, we may begin to suffer from one of the anxiety disorders. Research indicates that anxiety disorders are the leading emotional health disorder for women and are second only to substance abuse among men. Fortunately, treatment in the form of medication and/or therapy is available and generally effective.

Stress can be helpful when it prompts us to take action to solve a problem. In fact, we can use our perceived stress as a clue that there is a problem and that we need to confront it. Public speakers, athletes and entertainers have long known that stress can motivate them to perform much better. When we don't recognize our anxious feelings or don't have the tools to deal with them, we may continue to expose ourselves to the stress, which leads to more problems.

Prolonged stress is demanding on our bodies and our lives in general. The constant state of "fight or flight" may cause heart palpitations, dizziness, trembling or shaking, increased blood pressure, sweating, choking, high stomach acidity, nausea, chest discomfort, or muscle spasms. We may feel detached, out of touch with reality or think we are dying or going crazy. There is evidence that prolonged stress can lead to heart disease and a compromised immune system. Stress depletes our energy and interferes with concentration. We may become abrupt with other people and engage in emotional outbursts or even physical violence. Our relationships and job security may be jeopardized. People who experience prolonged stress are more prone to self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse. Read on to compare how anxiety appears in adults compared to Dr. Steck's article about how it can manifest in children.

The Anxiety Disorders

An anxiety disorder is longer lasting than normal anxiety, is more intense and can lead to fears that interfere with the ability to function in daily life. Here are some of the more common types of anxiety disorders seen in adults:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) occurs when a person has endured for at least six months a state of being excessively worried, feeling on edge continually, having sleep difficulty, and finding it hard to experience pleasure and relaxation. The symptoms include restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, feeling easily fatigued, and muscle tension. This diagnosis is not accompanied by phobias, obsessions, or panic attacks.

Agoraphobia, which affects about 5% of the population, is the most prevalent of the anxiety disorders. People who experience agoraphobia are afraid of finding themselves in situations where escape would be difficult or help might be unavailable. They experience panic disorders in certain situations and then, over time, develop a fear of finding themselves in these situations. Common situations include using public transportation (subways, airplanes, trains), being at home alone or in crowded public places (such as restaurants, grocery stores, etc.), and enclosed or confined places such as tunnels, bridges, or classrooms.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can happen if a person has been through a serious, life-threatening event, such as a natural disaster, terrorist act, a car or plane crash, rape, assault, or other violent crime. Those with PTSD may for months or years afterward experience repetitive thoughts about the event with an attempt to avoid thinking about it, nightmares, emotional numbness, feelings of detachment, flashbacks, an attempt to avoid activities associated with the event, a loss of interest in pleasurable activities, and other symptoms of increased anxiety.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) happens when stress or chaos in one's world causes a person to think and worry repetitively about something (these are called obsessions) or else to engage in repetitive behaviors, like hand-washing or checking on things excessively (these are called compulsions). Obsessions are recognized by the person as irrational, but they continue to intrude in the individual's thoughts for extended periods of time. Examples of obsessions include images of violence or doing violence to somebody else and insecure thoughts about leaving the lights on or leaving the door unlocked. Compulsions are behaviors that are performed to reduce the anxiety of the obsessions. Examples include excessive hand washing, checking the lights or the stove time and time again, or ritualistic behavior such as counting steps while walking.

Social Phobia involves fear of embarrassment in situations where others scrutinize or evaluate your behavior. This usually causes the person to want to avoid these situations, although many simply endure the anxiety associated with these experiences. The most common social phobia is speaking in public, but other forms include fear of writing in front of others, fear of crowds, test-taking phobia, fear of spilling food or choking in restaurants, fear of blushing in public, or fear of using public restrooms.

Phobias are intense fears and avoidances that occur when a person is exposed to a certain type of situation. These fears are specific to the individual and are sometimes unexplainable. Common examples include airplane phobia (fear of flying), elevator phobia, fear of storms, animal phobia, doctor or dentist phobia and illness phobia.

Panic Attacks are one of the most debilitating manifestations of stress. These dramatic episodes of anxiety seem to come out of the blue and happen even when there is no real danger. They are usually intense for a few minutes and then subside. The sufferer may experience chest pains, the feeling of smothering, dizziness, heart pounding, depersonalization, hot and cold flashes, sweating, numbness, or nausea. These symptoms may be accompanied by fears of dying, going crazy and losing control. Those who experience panic attacks often live in fear of their next attack. This may prevent them from leaving the house, being alone or driving. Panic attacks are not triggered by a specific phobia. They seem to come spontaneously and unexpectedly.

Managing Stress and Anxiety

The first step in learning how to manage your stress and anxiety is to increase your level of awareness in two areas:

1. your level of experiencing stress in your body
2. the nature of the events which bring on your stress

The second step in learning to deal with stress and anxiety is to take positive action to reduce your tension. Learning and using any of the following techniques can serve as an effective tool for combating stress and anxiety.

Relaxation: There is a wide range of relaxation techniques available for coping with stress. Most of these methods can be learned in therapy, but the most important point to keep in mind is that you should find a technique that works for you. The list of choices includes breathing exercises, yoga, meditation, prayer, massage, visual imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation.

Exercise: Regular exercise helps reduce stress and anxiety. It also raises self-esteem, primes the immune system and plays an important role in preventing disease. Ideally take the time to find a form of exercise that you like to do.

Self-Rejuvenation: Find things you enjoy. This could include listening to music, meditation, prayer, sports, dance, art, nature, writing, laughing or spending time with friends. Take time for recreation and spiritual pursuits on a regular basis. This helps maintain balance and perspective.

Setting Limits: We often embrace faulty expectations about how much we should accomplish in life. This is a prime culprit in increasing levels of stress and anxiety. It may help to examine what is really important in our lives, scale back, think smaller and give our time more completely to the things that matter the most.

Effective Communication: If you are too passive with others you may feel that you are being taken advantage of and resentful. Conversely, if you are too aggressive you may antagonize others and create more stress and anxiety for yourself. A number of effective communication techniques such as assertiveness training can be explored in therapy.

Social Support: Find people who can nurture and support you and learn to trust appropriately in them. Stress and anxiety levels increase when we try to deal with life's difficulties alone. The mere act of talking about issues that we usually hold inside serves to reduce our stress levels.

The clue to handling stress and anxiety well is to acquire the skills we need to feel empowered. This requires a good, honest exploration into our lives. We need to explore the strengths that we already have for coping with stress as well as learn new skills. A professional therapist has a number of specific techniques for the treatment of stress and anxiety, as well as overall life strategy plans for dealing with these problems and other life experiences. We need to be able both to comfort ourselves and to let others nurture us as well. All of us can learn, with some healthy exploration, to manage stress and anxiety successfully.