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Fear and Worry

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FEAR AND WORRY
by Helen Nunberg, MD, MPH

We all experience anxiety, typically when we think our security or our self-image is threatened. Fear is both an emotional and physical experience. Worrying includes apprehension, catastrophic thoughts and obsessions. Fear and worry are regulated by neural networks that are regulated by the neurotransmitters serotonin, GABA, glutamate, and norepinephrine.

Too much anxiety is painful and disabling. It interferes with functioning, even simple tasks become difficult. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders affect almost one in five adults. People say they are “stressed out” if they are always on edge, experience trouble sleeping, can’t concentrate, feel exhausted. If this continues for over six months, it meets the diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder. When it goes on for years, the sufferer may think it is “normal,” no longer remembering what it’s like to be relaxed, or only able to relax with alcohol or marijuana. Drugs and alcohol used excessively result in additional problems. Chronic anxiety often goes along with depression and irritability, interfering with interpersonal relations and job performance.

I enjoy walking alone in the forest, exploring new trails. On one occasion, at the end of the day, darkness approaching, I thought I was lost. My heart pounded, my chest tightened, and I felt afraid. The anxiety was useful, warning me to be careful, alerting me to possible harm. Fortunately, I was able to calm myself and find my way home. Had I panicked I might have had extreme muscle tension and been frozen in place, or been so agitated that I’d have flown off in the wrong direction. If these feelings
and physical reactions occur without a trigger during routine activities such as driving, it meets the diagnostic criteria of a panic attack, and if occurring repeatedly, it’s a panic disorder.

You probably spend more time driving than walking in the forest. If you’re stressed out, chronically experiencing high levels of anxiety, driving in a traffic jam is likely to cause muscle tension, feelings of frustration, and overwhelming worry about the consequences of being late. You might lose control with an angry outburst or you might drive dangerously.

Cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown in studies to be effective in the treatment of anxiety disorders. It teaches awareness of self-defeating thoughts and understanding of the source of fears and worries, as well as how to challenge and change these habits of thinking and behavior. Practicing relaxation techniques such as meditation and deep breathing has also been shown to be effective, reducing high levels of anxiety by developing the ability to tolerate and detach from negative thoughts and feelings.

Medication is also effective in the treatment of anxiety disorders. Effective medications should be more subtle, sustained, and have fewer side effects than alcohol or marijuana. The right medication adjusts neurotransmitter levels, stabilizing overactive neural networks, supporting the work of learning new ways to be in the ordinary traffic and extraordinary forests of life.

Dr Helen Nunberg received her medical degree from Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York City, and her Master in Public Health from the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Nunberg has provided family medical care in the Santa Cruz area for
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