

Recognizing Anxiety

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We all feel anxious at times. Everyone has day to day challenges such as pressures at work, having to give a presentation, having a near miss accident with a car, writing a test or awaiting a lab test result. These can all lead to a sense of worry and fear. Although these feelings may be uncomfortable for us to bear, they are normal and expected sensations that we face on a day to day basis. Often, anxious feelings can help us to deal with threatening situations such as to study harder for an exam or perform better in sports. Anxiety is not normally harmful and normally lasts for a short duration of time. However, when anxiety becomes persistent and disrupts one's ability to cope with daily life, then this may be a sign of an anxiety disorder. People diagnosed with an anxiety disorder describe prolonged feelings of fright and distress that can disrupt relationships, ability to perform at work, and quality of life.

Anxiety disorders are the most common of all mental health problems. It is estimated that 1 in 10 Canadians are affected. Anxiety disorders most often have an onset in childhood or adolescence but can begin in adulthood. They are more common in women than men. Anxiety disorders can be treated once diagnosed.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder:

Generalized anxiety disorder (or GAD) is described as excessive, exaggerated, chronic and debilitating anxiety and worry about everyday life events. People with symptoms of GAD tend to always expect the worst and can't stop worrying about health, money, family, work, or school. The worry often is unrealistic or out of proportion for the situation. Daily life becomes a constant state of worry, fear, and dread. Eventually, the anxiety dominates the person's thinking that it interferes with daily functioning including the ability to properly care for one's self, attend and cope with work and school, participate in social activities and partake in relationships.

Symptoms to Watch For:

GAD affects the way a person thinks and behaves, their emotions and often leads physical symptoms. Some of the symptoms of GAD can include: excessive and

prolonged worry, exaggerated or unrealistic views of problems, restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, headaches, sweating, difficulty concentrating, gastrointestinal discomfort such as nausea and diarrhoea, fatigue, difficulty with sleep, and trembling. It is common for individuals with GAD to have other forms of anxiety disorders such as panic disorder, phobias or obsessive compulsive disorder and the disorder is often accompanied by depression and issues with substance abuse.

Causes of GAD:

The exact cause of GAD is not fully known but it is believed that the origin is a combination of biological factors (genetics and brain chemistry) combined with environmental factors such as an individual's personal circumstances. Stressful events or trauma, such as abuse, the death of a loved one, divorce, and changing jobs or schools, may lead to GAD.

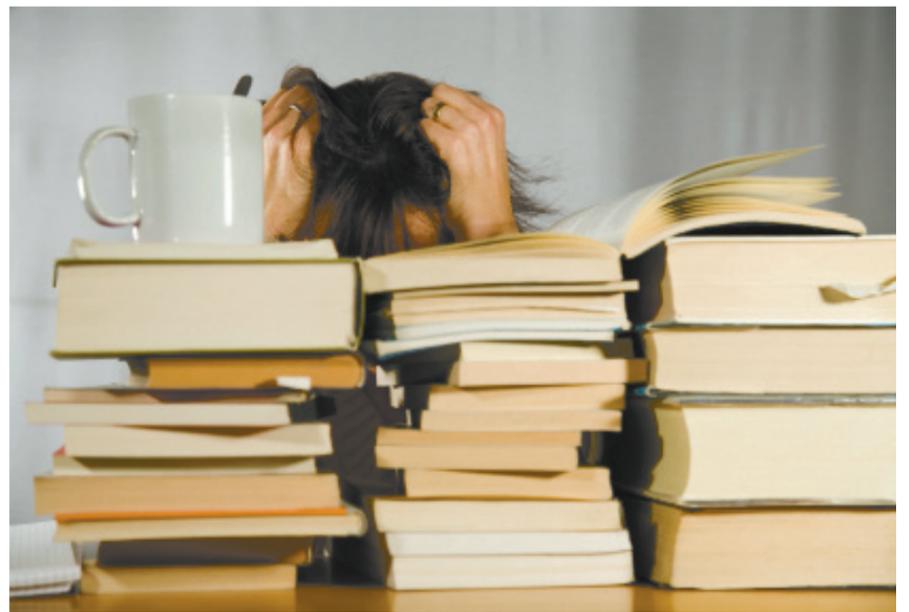
Diagnosis:

A proper diagnosis is key to ensure the right treatment path. Many people go undiagnosed for 10 years or more. If you are experiencing symptoms seek the assistance of your family doctor. Your doctor will gather information about your medical history and perform a physical examination. A diagnosis of GAD will be made based on reports of the intensity and duration of symptoms - including how your ability to function is disrupted by the symptoms. Your doctor will then determine if the symptoms and degree of dysfunction indicate a specific anxiety disorder. GAD is diagnosed if symptoms persist for at least six months and interfere with your activities of daily living such as your ability to properly care and perform at work.

Treatment:

There are two main medical approaches to treating this anxiety disorder: (1) drug therapy and (2) cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). A combination of these two treatments can be effective.

As there is usually a biological component, anti-depressants and anti-anxiety drugs are usually prescribed. Drugs may be especially helpful for people whose anxiety is interfering with daily functioning.



It is necessary to inquire about possible side effects of any medication.

Therapeutic strategies often offered by a Registered Psychologist such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety. The technique helps people adapt their anxious thoughts, interpretations and predictions into ones which are more rational. This type of therapy helps control distorted thinking by looking at fear and worry more realistically.

Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing can help control muscle tension that often accompanies GAD. Support groups and educational resources are often also helpful in treatment. GAD can transform an individual's life and the relationship they have with their families and friends. Learning all you can about the anxiety you are experiencing can help you develop tools and coping strategies for living with the disorder.

Although pharmacotherapy, psychological, behavioural and supportive interventions may not totally rid one of GAD and symptoms may return from time to time, one can achieve substantial relief from symptoms with proper treatment.

What Can You Do?

Here are some things that you can do to control or lessen symptoms.

- ❖ Stop or reduce your consumption of products that contain caffeine, such as coffee, tea, cola and chocolate.
- ❖ Ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking over the counter medicines or herbal remedies as many contain chemicals that can increase anxiety symptoms.
- ❖ Exercise daily and maintain a healthy balanced diet.
- ❖ Incorporate a regular sleep routine.
- ❖ Seek counselling and support after a traumatic or disturbing experience.
- ❖ Practice stress management techniques like yoga, deep breathing or meditation.

More information:

For further information about anxiety disorders, contact the Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada (www.anxietycanada.ca). For more information and to find support and resources available in your community contact the Canadian Mental Health Association (www.cmha.ca).

did you KNOW?

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at Be_Well@nstu.ca.

Please contact Erin at ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca to provide your NSTU email address. The Be_Well@nstu.ca list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

