Anxiety

Disclaimer: These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is our body’s normal response to a threatening situation or environment. From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety performed a very useful purpose in preparing us to actively handle dangerous situations in which our lives were at risk. At these times, our body would prepare to either fight, freeze or flee and in this way we were kept safe from harm. Today, while the situations in which our lives are in danger may be few, our bodies continue to respond to a perceived threat in the same way.

Everybody experiences anxiety, however the frequency and severity of anxiety symptoms varies from person to person. Some people experience a low to moderate level of anxiety in response to a feared situation and quickly return to a relaxed state after the situation has passed. In contrast, other people may experience a very high level of anxiety in response to the same situation and will take considerably longer to return to a normal state. For many, there is no obvious link between their anxiety symptoms and a specific threatening situation. They may tend to experience a general sense of anxiety which may be difficult for them to describe in specific terms but which nonetheless has a negative effect on their ability to relax, sleep, concentrate, work, study or relate to others. This can lead to feelings of irritation (with self and others), frustration, anger and often sadness or low mood.

Some Common Symptoms of Anxiety

Many of the symptoms of anxiety are physiological responses which have the purpose of preparing your body to fight, take flight or freeze. These occur when the body releases adrenalin into the bloodstream and some of them include:

- Racing heart beat
- Tightness or pain in the chest
- Hot flushes
- Shortness of breath
- Rapid and shallow breathing
- Dizziness
- Confusion and a sense of unreality
- Dry mouth
- Choking
- Nausea
- Tightness or ‘butterflies’ in the stomach
- Numbness and tingling in fingers and toes
- Trembling and shaking in arms, legs and voice
- Increase in sweat production
- Afterwards – feeling tired and drained (the fight or flight response is a general activation of the whole body metabolism which takes a lot of energy)

Other symptoms include psychological experiences such as:
• Worry
• Fear
• Sense of dread
• Lack of ability to concentrate or focus attention
• Irritability, feeling on edge, uneasiness
• Fear of “going crazy”
• Fear of dying
• Feeling of “unreality”
• Changes in experience of self and the world

It is normal to experience a number of these symptoms in a variety of situations at university such as waiting to take an exam or give a presentation, beginning at a student placement/practicum, speaking to a lecturer about a late or difficult assignment, or introducing yourself to someone of the opposite sex. Many students believe that they are the only one who is affected by anxiety in these sorts of situations and are surprised and relieved when they find out how many of their classmates are likely to be experiencing very similar thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. However, as stated above, some people experience a number of the above symptoms frequently without any apparent connection with a specific situation, context or fear.

Consequences of Anxiety

It is common for people to experience some or even most of the above symptoms in response to a specific threatening situation. For many, it is an uncomfortable experience but one that is usually soon forgotten. For others it is an extremely frightening experience in which they may have felt as if they were going to die or ‘lose control’ and ‘go crazy’. When this occurs, the consequences can affect people’s lives in significant ways. For these people, the fear of re-experiencing these symptoms and the potential of ‘losing control’ may develop into a panic disorder. When a person develops a panic disorder, they tend to be highly attentive to physiological sensations (because they fear having an anxiety or panic attack) so that any increase in breathing rate, for example, may be interpreted as the onset of another ‘anxiety attack’. Accordingly, just the perception or thought of having another anxiety episode may be threatening enough to the person to actually trigger one. In this way, the individual may live in almost perpetual fear of experiencing an anxiety attack and, if untreated, this tends to have a significantly negative impact on their life.

Many people experience a general sense of anxiety and are not able to identify the source of their fear. Whether or not the cause of the anxiety is easily identified, people who experience persistently high levels of anxiety tend to develop strategies that temporarily decrease the anxiety and thereby bring some relief. Common examples include alcohol and drug use, shopping, cleaning and other distracting activities, and avoidance of situations that tend to stimulate anxiety. However, in the long term these strategies can act to increase the frequency and severity of an anxiety response. For example, deciding to go to the pub with friends instead of studying the day before a difficult exam may reduce anxiety in the short term but the intensity and duration of the anxious symptoms will almost certainly increase at a later stage (e.g. when they realise that there is insufficient time left to study the required material). At this point, the anxiety experienced by the person may be very uncomfortable, sometimes verging on panic. When a person uses distraction or avoidance strategies on a frequent basis over a long period of time, the experience of anxiety can become very uncomfortable and quite difficult to overcome alone.
Treatment Options

The good news is that people who experience high levels of anxiety can learn a number of quite simple strategies to help them reduce and manage their anxiety. Some of the ways in which these may be acquired are listed below:

Counselling

One way of learning some of these strategies is to work with a counsellor to identify the sources of the anxiety and then develop a repertoire of skills that are helpful in managing anxiety. Free counselling is available to all students and staff at Curtin University of Technology at the University Counselling Service (9266 7850).

Relaxation

Relaxation, meditation and breathing techniques have all been found to be extremely helpful in alleviating the physical symptoms of anxiety. These skills can be learned in a number of different ways – with a counsellor, in a yoga or meditation class, or with the use of specifically designed books and cd's.

Medication

For some people, anxiety symptoms are persistently at a high level and can be extremely frightening. In these cases, medication may be appropriate before beginning work with a counsellor or other health professional to develop helpful strategies for managing their anxiety. However, medication alone is rarely an effective long-term solution and most people who experience persistently high levels of anxiety benefit from a combination of medication and counselling. If you do not have a GP whom you regularly consult, the Curtin University’s Health Service is available to all students and staff of the university (9266 ).

Tips for Self-help

Firstly, remind yourself that anxiety is a normal experience. Everyone experiences anxiety in response to a threatening or stressful event. However, the more stressful your life, the more likely you are to experience symptoms of anxiety. Review your current life situation and identify any activities or responsibilities that are causing you stress. Are there some you can eliminate from your life or re-organise in a way that will reduce your current stress level?

Regular exercise, good sleep patterns and a healthy diet are some of the best strategies for reducing the toll that stress and the consequent anxiety takes on you. Developing and maintaining healthy lifestyle habits often helps people to feel more in control of their lives and more able to make long-lasting changes that will alleviate their anxiety over the course of their lives.

Facing the anxiety (armed with some strategies to help you manage the discomfort) can be a very helpful way of reducing its intensity. For example, approaching a lecturer for clarification of the topic may feel uncomfortable in the short-term but may be an effective way of reducing anxiety experienced in relation to making a start on a difficult assignment.

For a comprehensive list of strategies you can initiate yourself, go to www.ucl.ac.uk/support-pages-information-pages/anxiety-and-panic/index.shtml

Further Information and Resources

For more comprehensive information regarding anxiety and panic disorder, please refer to:

www.algy.com/anxiety/files/barlow.html
www.cci.health.wa.gov.au