



Do you suffer from an anxiety disorder? If so, you're not alone

In the United States alone, there are more than 40 million Americans who are suffering from some form of anxiety disorder. We all have anxiety-based feelings as a natural "fight or flight" response, but when these feelings pop up in a situation that wouldn't otherwise provoke them, they're confusing, frightening and are often linked to a mental illness. Anxiety disorders are also expensive for the American health care system, which is estimated to be spending over \$40 billion dollars a year to treat anxiety-related illnesses. The Anxiety Disorders Association of America estimates that only about a third of people with an anxiety disorder ever seek out treatment.

Let's discuss some of the most common disorders and a few specific treatment options. No self-diagnosis, please; the best advice is to talk to your doctor.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Generalized Anxiety Disorder often begins during stressful circumstances, affecting close to 7 million Americans. Unlike other anxiety disorders, GAD is defined by worrying that isn't specifically based on panic attack fears, phobias and embarrassment, which are common in other disorders. The worrying in GAD continues for months on end (usually for more than six months at a time) with job issues and academic performance being the most common catalysts. While we all worry, GAD worriers can't control it and have a great deal of difficulty stopping it, leading to increased sleeping difficulties and bad concentration with headaches and dizziness to go along with it. An example could be someone at a new job and the contributing factors of work stress, a new environment and new co-workers creating a constant sense of worry that doesn't seem to get better when they're off the job.

Fortunately, there are treatment options for people dealing with GAD, with some of the most common ones being SSRI (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) medications (better known as Prozac, Paxil and Lexapro). SSRIs are antidepressants that change brain chemistry by altering how the brain re-absorbs serotonin, a prime factor in moods and anxiety. The idea is that serotonin changes will make us feel less anxious.

A more natural alternative to SSRIs is Kava, a root that offers temporary relaxation without SSRI's potential withdrawal symptoms (sexual dysfunction, diarrhea, etc.). Medication still won't address the fundamental issues of the disorder, which can be addressed through cognitive therapy. The goal of therapy is to replace negative worries with positive thinking and make day-to-day living significantly better.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Howie Mandel suffers from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, which is commonly associated with intrusive thoughts, obsessions and compulsive activities. Currently, OCD remains under-diagnosed due to stigma and some people's unawareness that they even have it. Even though it reportedly affects about 2% of the U.S. population, the actual number is higher.

OCD cycles begin with irrational and disturbing thoughts that can be fears (like contamination or sexual insecurities) that go beyond the realm of common anxiety. OCD sufferers know that their fears are irrational, but they still feel compelled to perform specific actions to try and diffuse these thoughts and ease their stress. An example would be someone who has a fear of germs and then goes to great lengths to avoid shaking hands, which is thought to be the case in Mandel's situation.

Like GAD, OCD is also treated frequently with medicine and therapy. We've talked about SSRI medications, but when they are used in OCD cases, they must be taken in higher doses. In addition, medication takes much longer to work (sometimes a few months) and it often doesn't provide total relief for OCD sufferers. On the natural front, a sugar called inositol, found commonly in bran cereals and nuts, is known to affect serotonin and reduce OCD symptoms. For patients choosing the therapy route, they are subjected to activities that will reduce obsessions and rituals, thus breaking the OCD cycle. With the aid of a therapist, they will do things like touch tissues that are "dirty" without washing their hands afterward. With the obsession/ritual cycle broken, the issues can slowly begin to resolve themselves and lessen the effects of the disorder.

More on anxiety disorders, including panic disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder...

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