

Anxiety Disorders

Some anxiety is helpful. It warns us of danger. It stirs us up to take action. It puts us on the alert to give of our best (say in a test or interview). But an anxiety state tends to be crippling and debilitating. Doctors recognise different sorts of anxiety states.

A. Different kinds of Anxiety Disorders

1. Panic Disorder

Frequent and unexpected experiences of intense fear or terror. Physical symptoms include: chest pain, heart palpitations or racing, breathlessness, dizziness, stomach upsets, nausea, flushes or chills, tingling or numbness, feelings of unreality, fear of losing control or doing something embarrassing and fear of death.

2. Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Persistent, chronic, exaggerated worries about everyday life: health, money, family or work, lasting at least six months. Normally expecting the worst without any good reason. Physical symptoms include tiredness, tension, trembling, hot flushes, insomnia, headache, nausea, light-headedness, breathlessness and lack of concentration.

3. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Long-term symptoms caused by a traumatic event such as child abuse, violent assault, rape, natural disasters or serious accidents. These may include nightmares, flashbacks, numbed emotions, depression and anger, irritability and being easily frightened.

4. Phobias

There are two major types

- a. *Specific phobia*: extreme, crippling, irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger.
- b. *Social phobia*: an overwhelming and crippling fear of embarrassment or humiliation in social situations.

Both of these sorts of phobia lead the sufferer to avoid certain objects or situations and can gravely limit their freedom and enjoyment of life.

5. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Frequent attacks of distressing thoughts or compulsive behaviours that seem impossible to stop or control.

B. Depression which may accompany an Anxiety State

Symptoms include:

1. Sadness
2. Apathy
3. Hopelessness
4. Loss of appetite
5. Insomnia
6. Lack of concentration

7. Helping people with an Anxiety State (or Depression)

1. Empathy

a. *An honest recognition of the personal “threat” one may feel when confronted with someone (especially a close relative or friend) in an anxiety state.* This “threat” may cause us to be irritable, angry or lacking in compassion, all of which are the last thing the anxious person needs. Beneath our irritation, anger, harshness may be feelings such as:

- I can’t cope with this situation
- Will (s)he come out of this anxiety state or will it become very serious?

b. *A willingness simply to “be there”.* A sufferer once said: “I wanted someone to climb down into the pit and sit with me before helping me to get out, rather than someone to shout instructions from the top.” That sums up this point very well.

c. *A warm acceptance of the anxious person.* For example:

- Convey to them that they are of infinite value whatever their state of health.
- Regularly express love by word or action.

d. *A clear acceptance that the anxiety state is not a sinful failure, but an illness.* Reassure the anxious person about this. An anxiety state may be caused by stress, trauma, biological hereditary factors.

e. *A determination to encourage gently but not challenge or condemn the anxious person.* It is acceptable to encourage an anxious person to continue with the basic activities of life, unless the anxiety is so severe they need a complete rest. However it is profoundly damaging to tell them (in so many words) to “snap out of it” or to “stop being pathetic or stupid” .

2. Counselling

An understanding Christian counsellor will be able to help at the right time. But it may be that the anxious person will need some antidepressant medication in order to be emotionally calm enough to benefit from counselling.

3. Meditation

Simple contemplative, Christian meditation will help replace and dispel anxious thoughts at the right time. But it may be that the anxious person will need some antidepressant medication in order to be emotionally calm enough to benefit from it.

4. Healing

Healing prayer for and, at times, with the anxious person will be a great help. The laying on of hands in a loving, peaceful context will be of great benefit.

5. Medication

Unfortunately, some people still feel there is a stigma about taking medication for anxiety or depression. But there is no need for such feelings.

a. God has provided chemicals and other natural substances to bring help and healing. Some Christians find it helpful to “say grace” (giving thanks to God) before they take medication.

b. Medication which will help with anxiety states include antidepressants or benzodiazepines, etc.

c. Medication can be seen as similar to crutches if you’ve broken your leg. They help to keep you going whilst deep healing takes place. Then, hopefully, (and always on medical advice) you can discard them.

d. Sometimes people prolong the emotional pain unnecessarily by refusing to take appropriate medication as soon as the anxiety state has become serious.