

Causes

The cause can often be difficult to identify and may be random in onset, but the following factors have been linked with susceptibility to panic attacks:

- A difficult childhood can make individuals more vulnerable to anxiety and panic as an adult
- A history of intensely stressful events may make an individual more sensitive to future events, especially if it reminds them of previous trauma
- Family history, it can run in families
- Caffeine, nicotine and cocaine can make anxiety symptoms worse
- Difficulty communicating your needs can be linked to high levels of anxiety
- The debilitating effect of long-term pain or illness can raise fears about the future and coping
- Hyperventilation

Safety Behaviours

- Avoidance of places, people and activities where the anxiety was felt, to avoid triggering another attack
- Not going out, avoiding public places and transport
- Not wanting to be alone
- Becoming inflexible and having rigid routines and rituals to try and avoid anxious situations
- Using food, alcohol, cigarettes for comfort

These behaviours can actually make the problem worse as by constantly trying to avoid the situation, your body doesn't learn that anxiety will reduce naturally over time.

Treatments

The good news is that both conditions respond very well to various treatments and interventions, and there is a lot you can do to help yourself:

- Talking through problems with family, friends or colleagues can help to see things from a different perspective
- Practicing good sleep hygiene, eg. a bath, milky drink, music, comfortable bed
- Writing down worries. 'Getting it out of your head' can sometimes help to identify specific stressors that you can work on
- Take a class to learn how to relax or meditate, it does need practice and time
- Exercise, we know that exercise releases muscular tension and endorphins (feel good hormones which help improve your mood)
- Try not to be frightened of your feelings as this can make them worse, accept what they are, that they won't harm you and that they will pass.
- Controlled breathing
- Counselling or CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) can be helpful
- If psychological therapies haven't helped, your GP may suggest prescribing medication

For further information,
please call us on

> 020 8295 8250

maitlandmedicaloccupationalhealth.com



PART OF THE Doctors Clinic Group



Milestones, Royal Parade,
Chislehurst Kent BR7 6NW



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Mental Health

Anxiety & Panic Attacks

With constant demands in our private and work life, with many of us leading busy lifestyles, it is unsurprising that we sometimes feel anxious.

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, worry or fear and is a natural response to uncertainty and essential to our survival by heightening our awareness. It affects everyone at some point in their life but can become a debilitating, long standing condition.

A small amount of anxiety can be helpful for example, feeling anxious before an interview might make you more alert and clear thinking and improve your performance, but too much anxiety could make you feel tired and unable to concentrate.

Worry is when your fears are focused on the future and “what if” scenarios. It is draining and non-productive and most of the things we worry about don't happen. It may be useful to ask yourself, “Does the worry make any real difference to the situation or the outcome?” Usually, the answer is NO.

Symptoms of Anxiety

Anxiety can have both psychological and physical symptoms. Psychological symptoms can include:

- Feeling worried or uneasy a lot of the time
- Having difficulty sleeping, which makes you feel tired
- Not being able to concentrate
- Being irritable
- Being extra alert
- Feeling on edge or not being able to relax
- Needing frequent reassurance from other people
- Feeling tearful

When you're feeling anxious or stressed, your body releases stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, which cause the physical symptoms that you can experience, these include:

- Pounding heartbeat or palpitations (an irregular heartbeat)
- Breathing faster
- Nausea
- Chest pains
- Headaches
- Sweating
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling faint
- Needing the toilet frequently or fluttering tummy (“butterflies”)

Panic Attacks

Anxiety can have both psychological and physical symptoms. Psychological symptoms can include:

A panic attack is a rush of intense psychological and physical symptoms. Panic attacks usually last between 5 and 20 minutes, and although extremely unpleasant and frightening, they aren't dangerous and shouldn't cause any physical harm.

Symptoms of a Panic Attack

Symptoms are often intense and frightening and can happen suddenly, often for no clear reason. These include:

- You may feel an overwhelming sense of fear and a sense of unreality, as if you're detached from the world around you
- You may feel a sense of impending disaster or that you're going to die

As well as psychological symptoms, you may also experience physical symptoms of panic, such as:

- A sensation that your heart is beating irregularly (palpitations)
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Shortness of breath (hyperventilation)
- A choking sensation
- Chest pain
- Feeling sick
- Tingling or numbness

The physical symptoms of a panic attack are caused by your body going into “fight or flight” mode in response to something you perceive as a threat. As your body tries to take in more oxygen your breathing quickens, and you release the powerful stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol to make your heart beat faster and your muscles tense up (ready to run).

These hormones would be burned up when escaping or fighting a real threat, but when no actual threat is present, they are left circulating in your body, producing symptoms that take a while to go away.