

# How to tell when your worry is out of control

When you consider that 19 million Americans suffer from fear-related disorders even in the best of times, it is not unusual to see a drastic increase in the number of people who suffer from anxiety these days, given the current events of our nation on "high alert" for terrorism and the rapidly increasing threat of war.



Your Mental Health

Len

McCulloch

We are being told to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting to cover our windows from biological weapons, bottled water, canned food, etc. We have sent and readied our troops for imminent war in the Middle East.

For people who suffer from anxiety disorders, these times are ripe for a worsening of their conditions. The recent uptick for developing disorders of anxiety in response to daily news. Psychotherapists are working overtime. The psychological state of fear affects us biologically and this can lead to having more accidents, being more susceptible to ulcers, heart attacks and AIDS, and we may become shamed by fear which diminishes our lives pervasively.

## BIOLOGY OF STRESS

Anxiety and worry have been referred to as "the mother of emotions" partly because of their strong effect on our bodies. Cortisol is a stress hormone found in disproportionately high amount in brains of people under acute or chronic stress. It is associated with an unusually high amount of worry, tension, anxiety and related symptoms.

Norepinephrine is overproduced in the brain when the autonomic nervous system works overtime in response to a sudden fear or a prolonged exposure to danger. This stress hormone is said to affect all tissues, but in particular the heart. A study in New York City after the 9/11 attack on our World Trade Center showed a

two-fold increase of life-threatening heart attacks in the first month following the attack. In the studied group, excessive secretion of adrenaline, especially in a constant, low-grade manner, is a sure sign of stress and raises long-term risk factors for cardiovascular disease as well as dampening the immune system and leaving stressed people more vulnerable to infections and possibly even cancer.

In response to terrorist alerts, generalized anxiety disorder is experiencing a six-fold increase in reported headaches, insomnia, back pain and neck pain, but after physical exam, no physical causes are found. Stress almost always comes out in bodily symptoms for adults and children.

## TOD MUCH?

Anxiety disorders take many forms. Panic attacks, agoraphobia, obsessive compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder are a few. According to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, approximately 4 million Americans between the ages of 15 and 54 suffer from Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

This disorder can be chronic and begin in early childhood or begin at any time in adulthood in response to an excessive amount of worrying. The worry leads to hormonal imbalances, which cause physical symptoms and clinically significant distress or impairment in school, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Worry has also been called "what if..." thinking. Worry is pervasive in generalized anxiety disorder. Such thoughts as "What if I'm late for the interview?" and "What if I don't do well on my math test?" constantly run through the mind of a worrier. They cannot help but think about multiple negative outcomes, none of which are likely to occur.

Worry is said to be the equivalent of unproductive, repeated thinking about the negative sides of life to the point where one is barely able to live life any longer and spends the majority of their time watching life and worrying about what they see.

Some individuals with generalized anxiety disorder have even been known to worry about worrying.

## GENERALIZED ANXIETY

The following criteria, as cited in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, are cardinal symptoms and a way of suffering through life for many people: Excessive anxiety, worry and apprehensive expectations occur more days than not for at least six months about a number of events or activities. The worrier finds it difficult to control the amount and content of their apprehension.

The anxiety and worry are associated with symptoms including: restlessness, feeling on edge, easy fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, mind going blank and sleep disorders. The anxiety, worry or physical symptoms cause significant distress or impairment in major areas of functioning.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE

An important step in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder is learning about it and understanding the disorder. This alone can give a person some control over their symptoms and they will learn that they are not alone, that others have similar experiences. Psychological therapy is warranted when the stress level accumulates so much that the distress level of the person is more than one wants to endure.

Similarly, when body manifestations of anxiety without physical cause become present, the seeking of psychotherapy is a good idea. Within the therapeutic framework, different approaches can be considered depending on what the patient wants to accomplish, the degree of psychological mindedness and related clinical factors.

One approach is to help the generalized anxiety disorder patient to learn more about themselves (consciously and unconsciously) so that they gain insight into the underlying causes of their worry-prone personality and discover what it is within them that maintains

their symptoms. Self-knowledge and self-exploration can go a long way to mitigate this disorder. Another approach can be directed at the symptoms themselves through therapy to help the patient change his/her thought patterns. This helps the patient in a reappraisal of their worry and allows them to become more realistic about their negative thoughts. This approach can also involve "challenging the worry" by adopting a new thinking pattern along the lines of, "What if this happens? ... If this happens, so what?"

When talk therapy is not enough, medication can be considered. This can occur with or without psychotherapy at the same time. Commonly used tranquilizers such as Valium and Xanax can relieve symptoms, including many of the somatic or body manifestations of anxiety. These are usually better for the short term, since long-term use can have complications. More commonly, long-term medical treatments of generalized anxiety disorder consist of never antidepressant medication which is proving to be a great benefit in the successful control of anxiety disorder symptoms as well as depression. Some of these are Zoloft, Effexor, Norpramin and Paxil.

## SELF-HELP

For sufferers of generalized anxiety disorder, and other forms of anxiety disorders as well, self-training in relaxation exercises, abdominal breathing

techniques, meditation, yoga and aerobic exercise can reduce the anxiety symptoms which the chronic worrier tends to develop. Trying to contain one's worries to a certain time of day and journaling (getting the worried thoughts out of the head and down on paper with pencil) are helpful to some.

One of the better self-help books at the library or bookstore is *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. Finally, attitude is important. A position of "I have an anxiety disorder" vs. "The anxiety disorder has me" can always be a good starting point. Don't be afraid to seek professional help, perhaps starting with a visit with a trusted family physician. This can lead to an appropriate referral to a mental health professional experienced in these matters.

## RESOURCES

Anxiety Disorders Association of America — [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) — this large organization keeps a geographic listing of mental health professionals who work with anxiety disorders including the Farmington Hills and surrounding areas.

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## Irene's will host annual Massage-a-Thon


Irene's Myomassology Institute will be hosting its 5th annual Massage-a-Thon March 14-16, at 26061 Franklin Road in Southfield.

The 48-hour event will offer free one-hour massages. All donations received will benefit Lighthouse PATH, a shelter that provides homeless women and children with transitional housing, education and job training. The non-stop event will begin at 7 p.m. Friday, March 14 and end at 7 p.m. Sunday, March 16.

According to Kathy Gauthier, director of Irene's Myomassology Institute, "The community has been very supportive of this event throughout the years. In 2002, we generated over \$20,000 and this year we are aiming for \$25,000."

Irene's Myomassology Institute expects to give over 450 massages with the help of 150 volunteer students and instructors. In addition, each student volunteer raised pledges from the community for the massages given during their six-hour shift.

"We are really excited to have an event like this at our new location. With our larger facility, we will be able to increase the number of massages and raise more money for Lighthouse PATH," Gauthier said. Irene's is now taking massage-a-thon appointments. Patients are welcome. To avoid waiting, call Irene's Myomassology Institute at (248) 350-1400.



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