

TIP SHEET #3

12 DEFINITIONS & TIPS ON ANXIETY

Some anxiety is normal and natural, occurring in children, teens and adults every day. Anxiety is generally defined fear that is future-oriented, while phobias are specific, exaggerated fears. Anxiety becomes problematic when it begins to interfere with everyday life.

1. There are many different types of anxiety disorders, and they are one of the most common forms of mental illness. They include:
 - a. **Panic Disorder**, which involves physical symptoms of anxiety as well as fear of having another panic attack.
 - b. **Social Anxiety** in which people avoid social situations (i.e., public speaking).
 - c. **Specific Phobias**, or intense fear of specific objects (i.e., snakes).
 - d. **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder**, which involves thoughts (obsessions) that tend to be unwanted and intrusive (i.e., maybe there are germs on my hands), and create anxiety, after which the individual engages in compulsions, or actions designed to reduce that anxiety (i.e., hand washing).
 - e. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**, or excessive fear related to several things.
 - f. **PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)** involves exposure to an extremely traumatic event that could result in death or serious injury, followed by a re-experiencing of the event, increased arousal, and avoidance of things that remind the person of the event.

2. There are three parts to anxiety: What I think (cognitions); What I feel (physical sensations); and What I do (behaviors). Helping people break down and verbalize these distinct thoughts, feelings, and behaviors helps them understand and face their fears.

3. Our bodies have a natural, physiological, way of coping with fear. A specific set of sensations occurs when we're anxious, including pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, and sweating. This set of symptoms, called the fight or flight response, is designed to help us avoid danger, but sometimes works more like a faulty smoke alarm. Helping teens understand these natural sensations in their bodies without overreacting, and showing them how quickly things can return to normal can help give them control over their feelings of anxiety.

4. Facing fears and anxiety can teach an individual that they are stronger than they think they are, that they can face something that they thought was insurmountable, and decreases those fears in the long term. Avoiding fears actually increases the chances that they will turn into a problem.
5. Excessively reassuring someone who is anxious that everything will be okay may backfire when trying to help them cope with anxiety. Instead, empathize that it's natural to feel anxious, and focus on helping them through their feeling so that they can successfully face their anxiety. Avoiding activities because of fear can lead to increased anxiety because it reinforces the false concept that anxiety makes the activity too scary or difficult. For example, if someone is anxious about having a panic attack while driving, and therefore is encouraged not to drive, they learn that driving must be dangerous, because otherwise, why would everyone be discouraging driving?
6. Fears, phobias, and anxieties can be successfully treated with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which helps teens change their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is a short-term (6-16 sessions) weekly type of therapy that teaches an individual to become his or her own therapist. The cognitive piece helps people identify their fear as excessive, and as something they can overcome by focusing on, and then changing, specific irrational thoughts that lead to anxiety.
7. Behavior therapy for anxiety often relies on the concept of Exposure Therapy, which focuses on helping an anxious person face their fears in a controlled environment. This may involve helping someone with a fear of public speaking give a speech in front of a few people, and then a larger group, and finally, a target audience. The goal of Exposure Therapy is to help an individual learn that they can feel anxious but that they can still live their lives.
8. Medication for anxiety may be an option as well. The most typical types of medication prescribed for anxiety are called Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors, or SSRIs.
9. The best thing you can do for someone with anxiety is help them face their fear. If you're experiencing symptoms of anxiety, think about how you can tackle your fear head on, possibly in small steps.

10. You can also help reduce anxiety through changing “self-talk”, a part of CBT where people learn to identify the thoughts that they have that perpetuate their fears. Instead, try and identify what you’re really worried about, and whether it’s likely to happen.

11. Praise and reward yourself for facing tough situations. Be liberal with support if you know someone who is struggling with anxiety – even if the fear is irrational, it’s difficult to face your fears. Any small step in the right direction should be encouraged.

12. Finally, take care of yourself! If you’re feeling anxious, make sure you’re managing your base stress levels by exercising, eating right, and getting enough sleep. All those factors can play a part in making anxiety worse as well.

by Regine Galanti, Ph.D. Director, Long Island Behavioral Psychology