

ANXIETY DISORDERS

Feeling anxious is normal, especially for adolescents when they face the various crises associated with this developmental stage. Anxiety is based on the body's natural responses to threat or fear. It involves tense muscles and increased breathing and pulse rate. Here the brain is in a state of hyper arousal with super awareness to sensory information or stimuli. Normal anxiety becomes a disorder when it is persistent when the threat is not there and results in one or more of the four the effects listed Figure 7.1.

Anxiety disorder is the most common mental disorder in children and adolescents with as many as 1 out of 10 suffering from it at some time (MACMH, 2010). Girls are more likely than boys to have an anxiety disorder (Evans, et. Al, 2005). Figure 7.5 contains symptoms or behaviors associated with anxiety disorders in children and adolescents.

Figure 7.5. Symptoms related to anxiety disorder in children and adolescents.

- Frequent school absences
- Refusal to join in social activities
- Isolating behavior
- Many physical complaints
- Excessive worry about homework or grades
- Falling grades
- Frequent bouts of tears
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Fear of new situations
- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Unrealistic obsessive fears
- Repeated unwanted thoughts and behaviors
- Tension about everyday life events.

There are several different types of anxiety disorders. The following descriptions are identified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as being the most common anxiety disorders affecting children and adolescents.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Students with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) are characterized by excessive worry. This worry could be related to recent, past, or future events. Common topics of worry include: past conversations or action, schoolwork, appearance, money, their future, family health, their own health, world events, or their competence in sports or academics. Symptoms include restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge, being easily fatigued, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbance

Specific Phobias. Students who have specific phobias suffer from an extreme and unrealistic fear or anxiety related to a specific animal, object, activity, or situation (such as flying, dogs, heights, seeing blood, dentists, clowns, etc.) Exposure to the phobic stimulus causes an immediate anxiety response, which may express itself in the form of a panic attack. This in turn causes the student to avoid fear situations. This condition can interfere with students normal social, academic, or social activities.

Social phobias (Social Anxiety Disorder). Students with social anxiety disorder have an excessive and persistent fear of social situations in which they feel they could be judged, ridiculed, criticized, humiliated or embarrassed. This disorder restricts interactions with peers and can significantly interfere with students' normal academic functioning, social activities, or relationships. Also, there is distress about having the phobia itself. Social phobia can be so debilitating that it may keep some students from going to school.

Panic Disorder. Students with panic disorders have repeated experiences of intense fear of impending doom or danger (panic attacks). These attacks appear without cause and are accompanied by rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, choking sensations, dizziness, nausea, sweating, a feeling of imminent death, or a feeling of depersonalization. Panic disorder is often accompanied by agoraphobia which is a fear of public or open places. Students with panic disorder will go to great lengths to avoid a panic attack, even refusing to attend school.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Here the student has reoccurring, persistent, or intrusive thoughts called obsessions. These obsessions cause repetitive behaviors or mental acts that the student feels must be performed (compulsion). The compulsion could be repetitive behaviors such as hand washing, ordering, or checking. The mental acts could be things such as praying, counting, or repeated words silently. The student feels driven to perform these in response to the obsession.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Posttraumatic stress disorder is based on having witnessed or been a part of a traumatic event or series of events such as physical or sexual abuse, violence, or a disaster (car crash, hurricanes, bombings, shooting, earth quakes, etc.). Students with PTSD present three kinds of symptoms: First, they suffer from episodes in which they re-experience the traumatic events in the form of flashbacks or reoccurring dreams. Second, they attempt to avoid any event or place associated with the original trauma. This avoidance is accompanied by feels of numbness or reduced emotional response. Third, students with PTSD experience increase physiological arousal including difficulty falling asleep, increased irritability, or they tend to over-react when startled.

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