

Nothing to Fear But...Anxiety?

"I should exercise more."

"I didn't make it to Bible study last night and now they probably think I'm a horrible person."

"I said something embarrassing and I'm afraid my friends won't like me anymore."

"That was the dumbest thing I've ever done! I'm so stupid!" "I never get anything right."

At some point in our lives, we have said one or more of these things to ourselves, or something like it. On the surface, these sentences sound innocuous, right? I mean, they don't really mean anything, do they?

The above statements are examples of negative self-talk, which can fuel negative feelings like anxiety. According to Amy Scholten, MPN, anxiety is a state of dread, tension, and unease. Anxiety is a normal response to stress or uncertain situations, but feeling anxious for long periods of time or at intense levels may mean that you have an anxiety disorder. You may have an anxiety disorder if the anxiety:

- Occurs without an external threat (called "free-floating" anxiety)
 - Is excessive or unreasonable for the situation or threat
 - Negatively affects how you function during the day
- The most common types of anxiety disorders are:
- Specific phobias
 - Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - Panic disorder
 - Obsessive-compulsive disorder
 - Social anxiety disorder
 - Generalized anxiety disorder

Anxiety may occur with other conditions, such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and depression.

Anxiety can be genetic, or caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain (i.e. serotonin or norepinephrine). Other risk factors can include being female, stressful life events, poor coping strategies, and a history of physical or psychological trauma.

Anxiety can result from negative thoughts about external events. David Burns, M.D., the author of *The Feeling Good Handbook*, says that how you think about your circumstances influences your mood. Many bad feelings come from illogical thoughts, or distorted thinking. As we go through our day, we are often triggered by an event or a conversation, which causes us to think a certain way about ourselves. If our thoughts are negative, we are probably guilty of one of these ten things:

- Should statements
- All-or-nothing thinking

- Magnification
- Jumping to Conclusions: Fortune telling/Mind reading
- Personalization and Blame
- Labeling
- Emotional reasoning
- Overgeneralization
- Discounting the positive
- Mental filter

(NOTE: The first five sentences of this article were examples of some of these thought distortions. Can you match the sentences to the correct distortion? Answers at the end of the article.)

Anxiety indicates a level of fear in our lives, or feeling afraid or scared. Other words that we use to describe anxiety include worry, nervousness, and stress. Sometimes this feels like butterflies in our stomach, tense shoulders and neck, headaches, tightness in the chest, a racing heartbeat, racing thoughts, dizziness, nausea, and sweaty hands – the list of symptoms of anxiety can go on and on.

Other psychological symptoms could include: worry or dread, obsessive or intrusive thoughts, sense of imminent danger or catastrophe, fear or panic, restlessness, irritability, impatience, ambivalence (uncertainty), and trouble concentrating.

Negative thoughts that lead to unhealthy emotions such as depression, anxiety, and anger are nearly always illogical and distorted even though they seem realistic – often times the lies sound very true. Reality does not produce clinical depression or anxiety, but wrong thoughts about reality does. Therefore, if you can replace distorted negative thoughts with thoughts that are positive and realistic, you can change the way you feel. You can decrease the anxiety, or better yet, make it go away.

How can I do this, you might ask? Some will experience a decrease in symptoms by making lifestyle changes, such as:

- Getting sufficient rest and sleep.
- If you smoke, quit
- Reducing or eliminating caffeinated beverages
- Drinking alcohol in moderation
- Avoiding using drugs
- Reducing exposure to stressful environments
- Exercising regularly

Some people report that relaxation techniques help reduce their anxiety significantly, when used regularly as part of a daily self-care routine. Relaxation can include, but is not limited to:

- Practicing deep breathing and meditation. Choose a positive mantra (“I can overcome!” or meditate on your favorite Bible verse.)
- Learning how to do progressive muscle relaxation.
- Working with a massage therapist.
- Engaging in pleasurable activities. This is could absolutely anything you enjoy doing – take an art class, play with your cat, drink a cup of hot tea.
- Do yoga

Having a strong support system of family and friends is key to coping with any mental health issue. Also consider seeking therapy to improve your coping skills, and/or join a support group. You might find that talking to a counselor can help you to address thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that play a role in anxiety. **Cognitive behavioral therapy** (CBT) in particular can help you identify negative thought patterns and behaviors. Over time, you can learn to retrain your thinking. This will help you choose better options in response to stress and anxiety.

As you practicing retraining your brain, remember to focus on what is true. Jesus is the “Prince of Peace” and holding on to this promise can also bring us peace of mind. Isaiah 26:3 says “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.” Trust in God to work in you, and to get you through this potentially difficult and scary time. “Casting all your care upon Him, for he cares for you.” I Peter 5:7

For severe anxiety or anxiety disorder, medication may be necessary. Please talk to your doctor or psychiatrist about what the best options might be for you.

Finally, to help prevent anxiety, consider taking the following steps:

- Avoid situations, occupations, and people that cause you stress.
- If unavoidable, confront and overcome situations that provoke anxiety.
- Find a relaxation technique that works for you. Use it regularly.
- Develop and maintain a strong social support system.
- Express your emotions when they happen.
- Challenge irrational beliefs and thoughts that are not helpful to you.
- Correct misperceptions. Ask others for their points of view.
- Work with a therapist.

All of the therapists at Catholic Charities are experienced in working with anxiety and its associated disorders. Most of the counselors in the Ames, Decorah, Dubuque, and Waterloo offices are also trained in Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR), a cognitive behavioral technique that has been proven to reduce anxiety and panic attacks, as well as stress, depression, phobias, and self-esteem.

For more information call 800-772-2758

Answers to quiz: 1 – should statement; 2 – mind reading; 3 – fortune telling; 4 – mental filter; 5 – all or nothing

Resources

Anxiety

The Feeling Good Handbook by David D. Burns, M.D.

When Panic Attacks by David D. Burns, M.D. *The Anxiety Cure* by

Archibald D. Hart Thought distortions and the definitions:

http://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/curriculum/313_MngngImpctTrmtcStrssChldWlfrPrfssnl/hndts/HO15_ThnkngAbtThnkng.pdf