

FEARS AND ANXIETY IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal part of life for children, adolescents and adults. This is usually a temporary response to mild stress. However, when anxiety persists or it becomes distressing it may be necessary to obtain assistance. Untreated anxiety that lasts for a long period of time may make it difficult for a child to participate in the normal activities needed for health development and enjoyment of life.

What are fears?

This is anxiety aroused by something your child can see, hear, feel or experience, such as a dog, a loud noise etc. When frightened your child suffers exactly the same mental and physical symptoms as when anxious, although they are usually more intense but not so long lasting. Once the cause of the fear has disappeared the symptoms quickly vanish.

Children and Adolescents who are anxious may experience the following symptoms:

- Unrealistic and excessive worry
- Continuous need for reassurance
- Over-concern about the past or future events
- Over-concern about performance
- Marked self-consciousness
- Complaints with no physical cause
- Restlessness or feeling 'keyed up' or 'on edge'
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
 - Distress on separation from parents
 - School refusal
 - Panic attacks
 - Avoidance of situations
- Distress in social situations
- Phobia
- Obsessions or compulsions

The main categories of anxiety disorder include:

Separation anxiety

Occurs in 2% - 4% of children and is the most common anxiety disorder found in children. Children often experience anxiety over separation from familiar people and situations. This anxiety is normal in babies but should lessen as the child grows up. Excessive anxiety over routine separations may indicate a problem.

Generalised anxiety disorder

This is characterised by self-consciousness, excessive worry about future events or about past events and about performance and competence.

Phobias

The word phobia itself means 'dread' or 'horror'. Phobias differ from other kinds of fear in 3 ways; the fear is intense, the thing that is feared poses no real threat, the fear is sufficiently powerful to cause the child to try and avoid the situation in future. Common phobias include agoraphobia (fear of going into public places), social phobia (anxiety related to social circumstances) and simple phobia (persistent and irrational fear and desire to avoid a specific situation).

Panic disorder

This is characterised by spontaneous attacks of anxiety which occur suddenly, without warning, for no apparent reason and not in response to a particular stimulus.

Obsessive compulsive disorder

This disorder may begin in childhood or adolescence. The main features are recurrent obsessions and/or compulsions. Obsessions are repeated unwanted thoughts that cause marked anxiety. Compulsions are repetitive behaviours (like hand washing) or mental acts such as counting/silently repeating words. Children and adolescents are often ashamed or embarrassed about their OCD. They may fear they are going crazy and try to keep what they are experiencing a secret from family and friends. It is important to understand the basis of the young person's worries.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

See fact sheet on Post-traumatic stress disorder.

What causes anxiety disorders?

The causes of each disorder may vary and it is not always easy to determine the causes in every case.

Factors considered in understanding these disorders include; personality, learnt responses, heredity and biochemical processes.

How do I know if my child or a child I know well has anxiety?

All children and adolescents will experience some anxiety at different stages of their development. However when anxieties become severe and begin to interfere with normal activities, specialist assistance may be needed.

Where can I get help?

With effective intervention, children and adolescents may be helped to experience some relief. Early treatment of anxiety can prevent the development of complications such as depression and misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

Knowing why anxiety arises and produces these unpleasant emotional and physical symptoms is the first step towards its conquest. Appreciating what's happening inside your child's body when he/she becomes anxious, fearful or phobic is going to help you approach the task of eliminating these negative feelings more expertly and confidently.

Providing understanding and support, stress management and relaxation exercises may assist in controlling symptoms. Mental health professional can advise you and your child about treatment options.

The services listed overleaf may also be of assistance to you and your child.

Resources - NSW Health,
National Mental Health Strategy brochure,
Helping your anxious child by David Lewis,
Early intervention for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents The Australian Early Intervention Network
for Mental Health in Young People Vol 2

