

# Anxiety Disorders

Most of us experience anxiety at times. It may be as we approach a test, or stand up to give a presentation, or start a new job. This normal anxiety keeps us alert and often diminishes as we become more familiar with a situation or behavior.

For some of us, however, fear and anxiety can reach overwhelming levels and affect our ability to function successfully and significantly reduce our quality of life. At times we cannot identify an obvious cause for it. Studies have found that about 18% of Americans have some form of anxiety disorder in a given year.

The Counseling and Advising Center at Grays Harbor College has screening instruments to help students determine whether they have one of the anxiety disorders listed below. We also offer personal counseling to help students learn to manage their anxiety, as well as referrals to mental health professionals in the community.

Following is a list of some of the more common anxiety disorders, along with the primary distinguishing features of each:

**Specific Phobia** is a marked and persistent fear of a particular object or situation. Common objects of phobia include spiders, dogs, heights, flying, catching an illness, water, storms or elevators. Specific phobias can also include fear of losing control, panicking, and fainting when confronted with feared object.

Some treatments: exposure therapy, energy psychology

**Social Phobia** is an excessive and unreasonable fear of social situations such as parties, meetings, interviews, meeting new people or dating. Social phobics fear that they will do something or act in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing. The feared situation is either avoided or endured with intense anxiety. This diagnosis is made if the avoidant behavior interferes with functioning at work or in usual social situations or if the person is markedly distressed about the problem.

Some treatments: cognitive therapy, exposure therapy, group role playing, social skills training

**Panic Disorder** – Periods of intense discomfort that come on unexpectedly and peak within 10 minutes. The discomfort is accompanied by symptoms such as chest pain, pounding heart, difficulty breathing, dizziness, faintness, trembling shaking, fear of going crazy or dying, and more. About 10% of adults have had some panic attacks. Panic attacks can lead to avoidant behavior and agoraphobia.

Some treatments: Relaxation training, breathing retraining, exposure therapy, cognitive therapy, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing)

**Agoraphobia** –An irrational and often disabling fear of being out in public. Persons may develop a pervasive avoidance of a variety of situations such as being in a crowd, crossing a bridge, or leaving home alone. If the person forces exposure to the feared situation, it is only considerable dread.

Some treatments: Exposure therapy, cognitive therapy, medication

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** – An unrealistic, excessive level of anxiety that lasts for 6 months or longer. The person with GAD is bothered by his or her circumstances almost constantly. They are likely to feel constantly "on edge" and tired and to complain of muscle tension. They may feel irritable and have trouble concentrating and may experience shortness of breath, increased heart rate, cold hands, digestive problems and more.

Some treatments: Cognitive therapy, relaxation training, problem solving skills training

**Acute Stress Disorder** – Comes after a traumatic experience such as war, rape, terrorism, violent crime, earthquake or flood. The person re-experiences the traumatic event and avoids stimuli that remind them of the event. They may have insomnia, impaired functioning, and may feel numb or detached. May suffer from intense guilt and a variety of physical symptoms. If Acute Stress Disorder lasts for more than one month the diagnosis is **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**.

Some treatments: Cognitive-behavioral therapy, self-regulation therapy, EMDR or energy psychology, guided imagery.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** – Can include obsessions, compulsions or both. Obsessions are recurrent or persistent thoughts, images or impulses experienced as intrusive or inappropriate and causing anxiety or distress. Compulsions are repetitive behaviors or mental acts that a person feels driven to perform to prevent or reduce distress or a dreaded event. Examples include checking and rechecking, counting, washing, repeating actions, or lining things up symmetrically.

Some treatments: Exposure therapy, cognitive therapy, relaxation training, mindfulness

**Substance-Induced Anxiety Disorder** -- The symptoms of this condition may resemble Panic Disorder, GAD, Phobia, or OCD. In this case the anxiety symptoms are due to the direct physiological effects of a drug, medication, or exposure to a toxin.

Some treatments: Rehabilitation, drug & alcohol counseling, motivational interviewing