

Anxiety and panic attacks

Anxiety is a perfectly natural experience that has kept many of us alive. It serves like a warning; it is a strong and usually unpleasant sensation that we have when something may be wrong. So it's a good thing to have. Except when you have too much of it.

There is a part of your nervous system that creates the sensation of anxiety. This is the part of your nervous system that helps keep you alive, alert, or wary. There is another part of your nervous system that kicks in to undo the anxiety; otherwise you would be anxious forever (or until your brain blew up). It is like a system of checks and balances; as soon as you get anxious, your body kicks in to calm you down.

People may have too much anxiety for several reasons. They may have inherited a nervous system that is really good at triggering anxiety or a nervous system that doesn't undo anxiety as quickly. They may have "learned" over a lifetime to be anxious about things that have happened or could happen. Their mental images of what has or could happen keep triggering anxiety. And finally people may have too much anxiety when they encounter situations that are really overwhelming. In sum, too much anxiety may be due to genetics, learning, intense situations, or some combination of the three.

The first step in dealing with too much anxiety is to accept the anxiety. Don't become anxious about the anxiety. As my father in law used to say don't fight the water. He was in the Navy and a remarkable swimmer. Water doesn't kill you; it is the panic that kills you. Relax and you will float. So it is with anxiety; anxiety makes you anxious (hence its name). Anxiety can also make you anxious about being anxious, and then you have started a vicious cycle. So accept the anxiety, don't fight it, and try to figure out what is causing the anxiety. This might be a good time to work with a therapist or physician.

If it is genetic, you might want to use medication. An SSRI like Zoloft, Paxil, etc. is a good choice. Fast acting sedatives like Xanax can kill the anxiety quickly, but they don't last long enough; the anxiety will come back and they can lead to dependence. An SSRI will gradually decrease the anxiety without dependence. You might also want to avoid stimulants, get a good sleep pattern going, and try to get in some physical activity each day.

If it is learned, you still might want to use medication as this will bring your anxiety down while you undo the learning that causes you to be anxious. To undo the learning, to "unlearn" anxiety, you need to do the thing that makes you anxious as much as possible and not do the things you do to avoid being anxious as much as possible. We call this exposure and response prevention. A counselor can lead you through the process. For example, if you get anxious about having to give a report in class, the best thing to do is to get up in front of the class as much as possible and avoid the things that you do instead of getting up in front (like sitting in

the back, coming in late, leaving early). Learned anxiety is like the old saying once bitten twice shy. If something makes you anxious, then you teach yourself to avoid it, which means you will never learn how to handle it. So if the anxiety is learned, medication might speed things along but basically you need to use a counselor, self help books, or support groups to unlearn the anxiety.

Sometimes we just run into situations that are beyond our control. With this kind of anxiety we need to know how to calm ourselves down until the situation is over. This is where things like slow deep breathing, imagining ourselves on a warm beach, singing our favorite song to ourselves can help. For some of us this is a good time for mediation, prayer, or chanting. Some of us like to rock ourselves, dance where we stand, or clench then relax large muscle groups. All of these fall under coping techniques. They are mainly used to assist that part of the nervous system that is designed to reverse or undo an anxious response.

Regardless of the reason for too much anxiety, you have several options to reduce the anxiety and most people can benefit from using all of these options. Remember, anxiety is a good thing. Anxiety about anxiety can lead to problems.

Panic attacks

One common problem for people with too much anxiety is panic attacks. A panic attack is a real bodily disturbance involving quite a list of symptoms including a sudden racing heart rate, feeling dizzy, feeling hot or cold, feeling sick to your stomach, and/or feeling like you are going to die. To diagnose panic attacks you should talk to a therapist or physician as there are other medical problems that can create the same symptoms.

Once you know you are having panic attacks you can reduce their occurrence but it will take some effort. The first step is to accept that this is what is happening. Encourage your brain not to go jumping to other conclusions. Even if you feel like you are going to die, you aren't. Your body is having a real reaction but it will not kill you.

The second step is to consider using an SSRI for awhile to help you learn how to control your anxiety. Many people with panic attacks find they discontinue the SSRI after a while. Even if you need to stay on, it is a small price to pay for a life without panic attacks. Be careful if you are given any kind of sedative, like Xanax, for panic attacks. While it works faster than an SSRI in the beginning, if you use too many you may develop a dependence which might lead to a medical risk.

The third step is to learn how to offset the panic attack with slow deep breathing. Teach yourself to take six to ten breaths a minute by slowing inhaling, holding your breath, and then slowly exhaling. Keep a smooth rhythm going and listen to your breathing. Focus on the sound

of your breathing instead of focusing on the sensation of anxiety inside of you. Practice when you are not having a panic attack. Slow deep breathing helps you expel carbon dioxide which may be triggering the panic attack in the first place.

The fourth step is to accept that the panic attack will not last long, it will end, and you will be fine. Challenge yourself to keep busy while having the attack. Try to keep doing things even when one hits. In time you will get a feel for how the sensation is under your control more than you think.

Again, the trick is to not panic when you panic. Your mind will jump to conclusions that will keep you anxious which makes you more prone to panic attacks. With medication, counseling, and practice you will eventually get your nervous system to run more smoothly and not have sudden spells of anxiety.

Karl Laves, PhD

WKU Counseling and Testing Center