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UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

Anxiety is a normal part of life. We all experience feelings of anxiety at some point in our lifespan. It is when anxiety leads our choices and behaviors that it becomes a problem. When anxiety interferes with our daily activities, it becomes a stressor and must be treated immediately as it may affect relationships with others and the enjoyment of life in general. A combination incorporating medication, counseling, and changes in lifestyle may help. However, in order to better approach this common problem; it is important to understand its definition and components first. It is believed that "understanding anxiety" may lead to a quicker recovery.

Common anxiety symptoms include:

- ◆ Feeling apprehensive
- ◆ Feeling powerless
- ◆ Having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom
- ◆ Having an increased heart rate
- ◆ Breathing rapidly (hyperventilation)
- ◆ Sweating
- ◆ Trembling
- ◆ Feeling weak or fatigued

Specific anxiety disorders are broken down into several diagnosable mental health conditions including panic attacks, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, anxiety disorder due to a medical condition, substance induced anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, amongst others.

A specific cause for anxiety has not been proven as evident. Common theories include anxiety as having a genetic component, as derived from a traumatic episode, due to a brain chemical imbalance, or as a result of a medical condition. Regardless of the source creating these anxiety symptoms; treatment should be sought. Once a diagnosis of any type of anxiety disorder has been made by a suitable source, treatment should begin.

Psychotherapy involves working out underlying life stresses and concerns and making behavior changes. It can be an effective treatment for anxiety. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one of the most common types of psychotherapy for anxiety disorders. Cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on teaching you specific skills to identify negative thoughts and behaviors and replace them with positive ones. Even if an undesirable situation doesn't change, you can reduce stress and gain more control over your life by changing the way you respond.

While most people with anxiety disorders need psychotherapy or medications to get anxiety under control, lifestyle changes also can make a difference. Here are a few things that you can do:

Get exercise. Exercise is a powerful stress reducer; it can improve your mood and keep you healthy. It's best if you develop a regular routine and work out most days of the week. Start out slowly and gradually increase the amount and intensity of the exercise you do.

Eat well. Avoid fatty, sugary and processed foods. Include foods in your diet that are rich in omega-3 fatty acids and B vitamins.

Avoid alcohol and other sedatives. These can worsen anxiety.

Use relaxation techniques. Visualization techniques, meditation and yoga are examples of relaxation techniques that can ease anxiety.

Make sleep a priority. Do what you can to make sure you're getting enough quality sleep. If you aren't sleeping well, see your doctor.

Quit smoking and cut back or quit drinking coffee. Both nicotine and caffeine can worsen anxiety.

Book Recommendation: Calming Your Anxious Mind
Author: Jeffrey Brantley, MD

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