

ANXIETY

'No worries' (Popular phrase)

Not many people can claim to have no worries at all, but chronic or acute anxiety is a problem. However, it's important to understand some basics.

- **Firstly**, normally healthy people do have worries and may experience periods of heightened anxiety, especially as difficult circumstances pile up. For many, these will pass by as conditions 'out there' alter.
- **Secondly**, a degree of anxiety about possible outcomes can be positive, allowing a person to be sufficiently focused to do well. Being keyed up at the right time is essential to all kinds of activity, from sport to business to many forms of creativity to socialising and all sorts more. The vital factor is being able to turn it off as well as on.
- **Thirdly**, it's generally when anxiety becomes particularly intrusive that it's a problem. Unwanted and useless anxiety that won't stop can prove problematic. That's when people need to seek help.

It's just the way I am: It's true that people vary in temperament, hence in proneness to anxious states, it's not true that either acute or chronic anxiety states need to be tolerated. There is always something that can be done about them.

What is anxiety? People use various phrases to describe anxiety states – being 'on edge', 'always on the alert', 'weighed down with worries' and so on. Anxiety states often interrupt sleep, deplete energy, make people more vulnerable to illness as well as to phobias, fears and obsessions. They can affect digestion and bowel movements. Unchecked anxiety can lead to panic attacks, depression, heart attacks and distressing skin conditions amongst other things.

Many of the symptoms of anxiety are also symptoms of the triggering of the ancient 'fight or flight' survival mechanism in the emotional brain - the mind/body system is then on automatic pilot, acting as if there were an immediate physical threat: it really is on edge and alert. Anxious thoughts plus difficult and traumatic circumstances plus perhaps fear, frustration or anger plus in some cases hormonal and other chemical changes within the body – all of these have been tripping the alarm system.

Should I take medication? Doctors prescribe a variety of medications for severe anxiety states. These can be very effective in the short term, though many studies have shown that they do not provide long-term answers and some people experience alarming side effects. Anyone taking prescribed medication should, however, consult his or her medical advisers

thoroughly before stopping it or reducing dosage. If medication is like a sticking plaster, bear in mind that you don't rip off the plasters while the wound is still smarting.

Should I take therapy? Again, definitions are essential. Traditional psychodynamic forms of therapy and counselling encourage introspection, which generally fuels anxiety. Studies have shown their effect on anxious states to be negative and sometimes dangerous. By contrast, therapy that focuses on practical solutions, teaching definite skills, setting regular targets and encouraging intelligent understanding of the emotional system has been found much more effective in the long term than drug treatments.

Good therapy for anxiety

- teaches the client practical ways to handle anxious states
- encourages understanding of how anxiety works
- shows clients how to balance their needs more effectively
- will process any past traumatic experiences in effective ways that are not intrusive
- involves neither psychobabble nor 'confessing all'
- does not encourage excessive introspection
- should not take a long time

How Many Sessions?

Some clients learn to handle their anxiety sufficiently in 3 to 5 sessions. Others find that more sessions are needed – sometimes as many as 10 or more where there are multiple accompanying concerns. You will be encouraged to measure and monitor progress from the beginning and should notice immediate improvements. Therapy ends when goals are achieved, though the therapist is usually available for occasional 'booster' consultations as and if necessary.