



PSYCH NOTES™

Courtesy of

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ANXIETY DISORDERS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS *

Young people with an anxiety disorder typically are so afraid, worried, or uneasy that they cannot function normally. Anxiety disorders can be long-lasting and interfere greatly with a child's life. If not treated early, anxiety disorders can lead to:

- missed school days or an inability to finish school,
- impaired relations with peers,
- low self-esteem,
- alcohol or other drug use,
- problems adjusting to unexpected situations, and
- anxiety disorders in adulthood.

What Are the Signs of Anxiety Disorder?

There are a number of different anxiety disorders that affect children and adolescents. Several are described below.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder - Children and adolescents with this disorder experience extreme, unrealistic worry that does not seem to be related to any recent event. Typically, these young people are very self-conscious, feel tense, have a strong need for reassurance, and complain about stomachaches or other discomforts that don't appear to have any physical basis.

Phobias - A phobia is an unrealistic and excessive fear of some situation or object. Some phobias, called specific phobias, center on animals, storms, water, heights, or situations, such as being in an enclosed space. Children and adolescents with social phobias are terrified of being criticized or judged harshly by others. Because young people with phobias will try to avoid the objects and situations that they fear, the disorder can greatly restrict their lives.

Panic Disorder - Panic disorder is marked by repeated panic attacks without apparent cause. Panic attacks are periods of intense fear accompanied by pounding heartbeat, sweating, dizziness, nausea, or a feeling of imminent death. The experience is so scary that the young person lives in dread of another attack. He or she may go to great lengths to avoid any situation that seems likely to bring on a panic attack. A child with panic disorder may not want to go to school or be separated from his or her parents.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) - A child with obsessive-compulsive disorder becomes trapped in a pattern of repetitive thoughts (i.e., obsessions that create anxiety) and behaviors (i.e., compulsions to reduce the anxiety). Even though the child may agree that the thoughts or behaviors appear senseless and distressing, the repetitions are very hard to stop. The compulsive behaviors may include repeated hand washing, counting, or arranging and rearranging objects.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) - Posttraumatic stress disorder can develop in children or adolescents after they experience a very stressful event. Such events may include physical or sexual abuse, being a victim of or witnessing violence (or other traumatic event), or being caught in a disaster, such as a bombing or hurricane. Young people with posttraumatic stress disorder experience the event again and again in strong memories, flashbacks, or troublesome thoughts. As a result, the young person may try to avoid anything associated with the trauma. They may also overreact when startled or have difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and eating.

How Common Are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental, emotional, and behavior problems that occur during childhood and adolescence. As many as 1 in 10 young people may have an anxiety disorder. Among adolescents, more girls than boys are affected. About half of the children and adolescents with anxiety disorders also have a second anxiety disorder or other mental or behavioral disorder, such as depression.

What Help Is Available for a Young Person With an Anxiety Disorder?

Children and adolescents with anxiety disorders can benefit from a variety of treatments and services. After an accurate diagnosis, possible treatments include:

- cognitive-behavioral treatment (e.g., this includes helping the child or teen learn to deal with fears by modifying the way they think and behave as well as exposure-based strategies),
- family therapy,
- parent training, and
- medication.

While cognitive-behavioral approaches are effective in treating some anxiety disorders, medications work well with others. Some anxiety disorders benefit from a combination of these treatments. In general, more studies are needed to find which treatments work best for the various types of anxiety disorders.

* Adapted from Child Development Institute

East End Psychological Services, P.C. (E.E.P.S.) offers help for issues associated with AD/HD, ODD, anxiety including traumatic stress, and depression experienced by people of all ages. Please feel free to contact Dr. Volpe, Clinical Director, at (631) 821-7214 for more information.

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