

What's normal anxiety -- and what's an anxiety disorder?

We live in a culture that doesn't **take mental health issues seriously**. There's a lot of **stigma**. Some people tell you to just **suck it up**, or **get it together**, or to stop **worrying**, or that it's **all in your head**. But I'm here to tell you that anxiety disorders, they're **as real as diabetes**.

Hi again. It's Dr. Jen, and I've **noticed** something with my **patients**. They often **describe** to me some **classic symptoms** of an anxiety disorder. **Constant worry, trouble sleeping, tense muscles, and struggle with concentrating**. But they aren't **getting treatment**.

There are a lot of issues with **mental health care** in this country. Some people don't have **insurance** that would cover it. Some have been **dismissed** or **minimized** in the past, and don't think **seeking help** will do any good. Some worry about the **stigma** and whether it could **affect** future jobs or relationships. But **severe anxiety** isn't a **moral** or **personal** failure. It's a health problem, just like **strep throat** or **diabetes**. It needs to **be treated** with the same kind of **seriousness**.

Before we can talk about anxiety disorders, let's talk about anxiety itself. Anxiety is the very real and normal emotion we feel in a **stressful situation**. It's **related to** fear. But while fear is a response to an immediate **threat** that quickly **subsides**, anxiety is a response to more **uncertain threats** that tends to **last much longer**. It's all part of the threat **detection system**, which all animals have to some degree, to help protect us from **predators**. Anxiety starts in the brain's amygdala, a pair of almond-sized **nerve bundles** that **alert** other areas of the brain to be ready for **defensive action**. Next, the hypothalamus **relays the signal, setting off** what we call the **stress response** in our body. Our **muscles tense**, our **breathing** and **heart rate** increase and our **blood pressure** rises. Areas in the brain stem **kick in** and put you in a state of **high alertness**. This is the **fight-or-flight** response.

There are ways the fight-or-flight response is **kept** somewhat **in check**, with an area of higher-level **thinking** called the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. It works like this. If a person sees something they think is **dangerous**, like a tiger, that sends a **signal** to the amygdala, saying "it's time to run." The ventromedial prefrontal cortex can say to the amygdala, "Hey, look. The tiger's in a cage. You know what a cage is. They can't escape from a cage. It's OK to calm down." It's a feedback loop that can help **keep the response in check**. The hippocampus is also **involved**. It provides context, saying things like, "Hey, we've seen tigers in cages before. We're in a zoo. You are extra safe."

With anxiety, these **threat-detection** systems and **mechanisms** that reduce or **inhibit** them are **functioning incorrectly** and cause us to worry about the future and our safety in it. But for many people, it goes into **overdrive**. They experience **persistent pervasive** anxiety that **disrupts** work, school, and relationships and **leads them to avoid** situations that may **trigger symptoms**. Anxiety disorders are not at all **uncommon**. Based on data from the World Mental Health Survey, researchers **estimate** that about 16 percent of individuals **currently** have or have had an anxiety disorder. These include **social anxiety** disorder, **panic** disorder, agoraphobia, and **phobias**. Studies have shown that people with anxiety disorders don't just have a different way of **reacting to stress**. There may be actual differences in how their brain is working.

One model describes possible mix-ups in the connections between the amygdala and other parts of the brain. The pathways that **signal** anxiety become stronger. And the more anxiety you have, the stronger the pathways become, and it becomes a **vicious cycle**.

The good news is there's **treatment for** anxiety, and you don't have to **suffer**. Remember, this isn't about weakness. It's about **changing brain patterns**, and research shows that our brains have the ability to **reorganize** and **form new connections** all throughout our lives. A good first step is to do the basics. Eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and **get plenty of sleep**, as your mind is part of your body. It might also help to try **meditation**. Instead of our heart rate rising and our body tensing, with **mindfulness** and **breathing**, we can slow down the **fight-or-flight response** and improve how we feel in the moment.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, a form of **talk therapy**, can also be fantastic. In it, you learn to identify **upsetting thoughts** and **determine** whether they're **realistic**. Over time, cognitive behavioral therapy can rebuild those **neural pathways** that **tamp down** the anxiety response. **Medication** can also give **relief**, in both the short term and the long term. In the short-term, **anti-anxiety drugs** can down-regulate the threat-detection mechanisms that are going into **overdrive**. Studies have shown that both **long-term medications** and **cognitive behavioral therapy** can reduce the **over-reactivity** of the amygdala we see in anxiety disorders.

High blood pressure and diabetes, they can be **treated** or **managed** over time. And the same is true for an anxiety disorder too.