

Depression and anxiety

We live in a society that praises the strong, the courageous, the winner. No wonder then if we are ashamed to feel anxious or depressed. In reality, problems of the mind or emotions are much the same as physical problems, and most are easily cured or controlled. Your GP can help work out the type and cause of your problem, and organise the best type of treatment for you.

Reactive depression

We all experience feelings of sadness or loss from time to time. Up to one in five of us will also experience a depressive illness during our lifetime, where the feelings of sadness, despair, anxiety, lack of interest and motivation are more intense than usual and last for longer. It is often accompanied by changes in our patterns of eating, sleeping and sexual interest.

Minor, or reactive depression is a normal emotional response to loss, and generally requires nothing more than time and supportive counselling.

Major depression

Major depression, which may occur without any apparent trigger, involves imbalances in the chemical make up of the brain, and generally responds to medication.

Weeks or months of excitement and euphoria sometimes accompany major depression. This is known as bipolar affective disorder.

Very severe depres-

sion may even require hospitalisation and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

Anti-depressants

There are many myths about anti-depressant medications, which may make a patient with depression reluctant to use this useful support.

The facts:

- Anti-depressants are not addictive, although depression may return if the patient stops them prematurely.
- They often take up to two weeks to start working.
- The newer drugs are as good as the older anti-depressants, but have fewer side-effects. They are safe medications if used correctly under medical supervision.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Both anxiety disorders and depression are developed or worsened because of unhelpful mental attitudes we have towards ourselves, life in general, and our mental symptoms. Cognitive behavioural therapy helps the patient to identify these negative thinking habits, to challenge them, and thus to replace them with more useful, positive ones. CBT is useful in treating mild to moderate depression, and in preventing relapses once the patient stops medication.

Anxiety disorders

One in eight Australians suffers from one of the anxiety disorders. Some people continue to func-

tion despite their illness. For others, their illness becomes crippling and affects every area of their lives.

People with generalised anxiety disorder suffer constant worrying thoughts and apprehensive feelings about harm or ill fortune befalling themselves or their loved ones.

Panic disorder

Sufferers of panic disorder have sudden attacks of panic, which seem to happen out of the blue with terrifying intensity.

The person feels a sense of impending doom, their heart races, breathing is fast, the head feels dizzy and the body sweats, shakes and trembles. After a while, some of these people may become afraid to venture out to the supermarket, into crowds, or even out of the house. They fear they will be trapped, with no escape, by another panic attack.

This avoidance behaviour is called agoraphobia, and people can experience panic disorder with or without agoraphobia.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

This condition follows an extreme trauma such as violence, rape or a car accident, and is characterised by terrifying flashbacks and nightmares.

Social phobia

People suffering from social phobia have an uncontrollable fear of being judged as inadequate by others. They

often limit their social contact for fear of being discovered as flawed and worthless.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Constant unwanted thoughts characterise OCD, which may include rituals such as frequent hand washing.

Once your doctor has diagnosed your anxiety condition and ensured no physical disease or medication is contributing to the symptoms, he or she may refer you for appropriate treatment. Some medications can be helpful in the short term, but cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has proved an effective treatment for most of these conditions. Your doctor can refer you to a psychologist who uses this technique, or to the Anxiety Management Service, which runs groups and employs the CBT method with excellent results.

Lifestyle changes

You can make some important preventive lifestyle choices to relieve mild anxiety.

- Ensure you have someone you can talk to about your feelings
- Ensure you get enough sleep
- Eat a healthy diet
- Exercise regularly
- Develop a regular relaxation practice such as meditation, yoga or playing a relaxation tape.