

Beating Anxiety

By Donna Henry

If you are a human being, you have felt anxious at one time or another. Anxiety is actually a normal and healthy response to stress that lets us know that we need to place our attention on a specific area. For example, early man felt serious anxiety when confronted by the Saber-toothed tiger. This anxiety told him to place his attention on turning and running. Modern men and women feel anxiety in different areas, such as starting a new job or going on a first date. These are natural everyday situations that incur some anxiety. Anxiety can also tell us when something is becoming overwhelming or too burdensome. It becomes an issue when it interferes with what you are doing or want to do, lasts too long, or the level of anxiety outweighs the risk in your situation (i.e., the idea of going to work feels the same as going to climb Mt Everest). Oftentimes, a person experiencing anxiety doesn't know why. They are often not doing anything differently than they did before the feelings started. When we begin to experience our anxious feelings as out of control, then we know we must take action to alleviate our stress and solve the problem.

If you experience too much anxiety, you are in good company. In any one year period, about 40 million American adults (almost 20% of the adult population) experience anxiety disorders. Some common anxiety disorders are Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Social Phobia, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The Latin root of the word anxiety means to choke or to strangle. Indeed, anyone suffering from anxiety knows that feeling well. Other common feelings include dizziness, sweating, a racing or irregular heartbeat, nausea, a relentless urge to move around, fear of dying, and thoughts of losing control or going crazy. It is no wonder that many people having an anxiety attack think they are having a heart attack. (If you are experiencing these symptoms, it is wise to see your medical provider to rule out a medical reason.) Anxiety disorders generally last a minimum of six months and can worsen unless treated. Anxiety is commonly a root of depression and can develop into depression if not treated.

Sometimes anxiety disorders occur along with other issues such as alcohol or substance use, physical illness, mental illness, and emotional and behavioral concerns. People frequently use alcohol and other substances to try to control their anxiety symptoms and other issues. Initially, the person may find that it appears to work; however, soon the alcohol or other substance acts as an intensifier and worsens their symptoms. Occasionally, the substance use or depression may have such an intense effect on the person that it needs to be treated before the anxiety can be addressed.

We would be remiss in not mentioning anxiety and physical pain. Many people suffer from physical pain and anxiety is often a result of the physical and emotional stress an individual experiences due to their ailment. Additionally, many pain medication side effects imitate anxiety. People using prescription

drugs or over-the-counter medications may find themselves with some of the same symptoms of anxiety. If suffering from pain issues, behavioral and mental health treatment can help with pain management and in possibly eliminating medication and anxiety.

The good news is that there is help. Treating anxiety is pretty straightforward; however, it doesn't happen overnight. Depending on an individual's difficulty and preference, usually anxiety disorders are treated with medication, therapeutic treatment, and more commonly, both. Medication does not cure anxiety, but can help in keeping symptoms under control. Common medications used are anti-anxiety, antidepressants, and beta-blockers to control physical symptoms. Therapeutic treatment involves talk therapy to identify potential causes with a trained professional, skill building techniques, changing thinking patterns that enable fears, building additional coping skills, learning more effective relaxation techniques that work for you, and relearning how to interpret emotional cues given to us by those in our environment (i.e., anxiety-arousing situations). Sometimes people experience a temporary increase in anxiety as specific fears are addressed.

If you believe you may have an anxiety disorder, your first step is to see your medical provider to determine if your symptoms are due to a medical condition or to anxiety/ stress. If it is anxiety you are suffering from, your medical provider will likely refer you to a behavioral health counselor. You and your behavioral health counselor will develop a relationship and work as a team to develop a plan to help you learn new skills and feel better. For further information, contact the Iliuliuk Family & Health Services at (907) 581-1202.

Our behavioral health program is partially funded by the citizens of the City of Unalaska.

Information cited in this article was obtained from www.nimh.nih.gov