

Anxiety Disorders.

A friend of mine was due to go on a long overseas trip. He had booked the airfares but as the departure date got nearer, his anxiety increased. His fear of flying led to the late cancellation of a long planned for world trip. His family and friends suggested he seek counselling for his abnormal anxiety about flying. He did so, is now rebooked, leaves soon and is seriously excited.

Now, anxiety is a normal, indeed, inevitable part of everyday life. We all, at some stage, feel 'uptight', 'stressed out' or frightened - particularly in unfamiliar or potentially dangerous situations. Our minds and bodies prepare for the 'fight or flight' response which releases adrenalin. This in turn increases mental alertness, muscle tension, heartbeat, and breathing and makes us sweat. An anxiety disorder occurs when these 'normal' responses are excessive in degree and/or duration, and when they impair ability to deal with everyday situations.

Anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness, however many people choose to not seek treatment. They thus allow a treatable condition to control aspects of their lives, often hiding their anxiety by avoiding contact with situations that could trigger an anxiety attack.

'Anxiety Disorder' is an umbrella term for a number of different conditions that includes: panic disorder; simple phobias; social phobias; obsessive-compulsive disorder; generalised panic disorder; separation anxiety; post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse induced disorder. Space does not permit me to write about all these anxiety disorders so I will limit my interest to panic disorders.

Panic disorder is characterised by sudden episodes of acute apprehension or intense fear that occur without good reason. Frequently, panic disorder is accompanied by agoraphobia, not wanting to associate with other people for fear of having a panic attack. Commonly feared situations include supermarkets, restaurants, the main street, or places where escape may be difficult in the event of a panic attack – e.g. theatres. The anxiety may be so all-encompassing that people choose to avoid going out and become virtual prisoners in their own homes.

Panic attacks usually last a few minutes, during which the person experiences intense fear and symptoms such as breathlessness, chest pain, racing heart, tremor, nausea, light headedness, pins and needles in the hands and feet and sweating. Frequently there is the feeling of having a heart attack and impending death. Often presenting symptoms appear to onlookers that this is indeed a likely outcome. These feelings simply add to the dread of the next panic attack and so the anxiety is well fed.

If people could stop or halt the anxiety – they would. But real success tends to occur when professional help is sought and counselling undertaken. Cognitive therapy combined with learning deep breathing and relaxation techniques is probably the treatment of choice. Support groups, where people can share their experiences and coping skills can also be beneficial.

And as usual, the sooner assessment and potential treatment sought – the better the chances of success.

Article –by Gordon Hudson, Manager, Like Minds Taranaki.