

Anxiety and Panic

onTrac@PeterMac
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CANCER

What is it?

Anxiety

Anxiety is a term that describes a normal feeling people experience when faced with threat, danger or when stressed. When people become anxious they typically feel upset, uncomfortable and tense.

Feelings of anxiety are caused by stressful life experiences, such as school exams, relationship breakdown, serious illness, a major accident or the death of someone close. Feeling anxious is appropriate in these situations and the feelings usually only last a short period of time. Stress and anxiety is considered to be a part of everyday life. However, when these feelings occur most of the time and involve continual or extreme discomfort or tension, they can become problematic and may interfere with day to day functioning. If this occurs it is important to seek help. Your doctor can talk to you about what help is available.

Phobia and Panic

Phobias are also a type of anxiety. Everyone has some irrational fears, but phobias are intense fears about particular objects or situations that interfere in our lives. These might include fear of heights, water, closed spaces or needles. Someone with a specific phobia feels OK when the feared object is not present. However, when faced with the feared object or situation, the person can become highly anxious and may experience a panic attack. With appropriate help it is possible to overcome phobias.

Panic Attacks

A panic attack is the sudden onset of high levels of fear or extreme anxiety in situations where most people would not be afraid. During these attacks a person may experience a number of symptoms associated with anxiety. These include shortness of breath, trouble catching breath, pounding heart, dizziness, tingling in feet or fingers, tightness or pain in chest, choking or smothering feeling, feeling faint, sweating, trembling, hot or cold flushes, nausea, or butterflies in stomach, muscle tension and the urge to run away.

Such attacks can then be followed by consistent concern about additional attacks, worry about the implications or consequences of the attacks or a significant change of behaviour due to the attacks. People may begin to avoid situations they think might trigger an attack, like shopping centres, public transport or being left alone.

What thoughts or feelings might I experience?

Anxiety can affect the way you think, feel, and behave. Some signs that you may be experiencing anxiety include;

- Intense worry on most days
- The worry is difficult to control
- Restlessness, feeling edgy
- Trembling
- Easily fatigued
- Muscle tension
- Difficulty concentrating, mind goes blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sweating & clamminess
- Headaches
- Aches and pains that don't have any physical cause
- Lightheadedness
- Palpitations
- Breathlessness
- Sleep problems

Anxiety and Panic

What could I do to help myself if I feel anxious or panicky?

- Eat healthy meals
- Do regular exercise
- Get enough rest
- Establish daily routines that involve some enjoyable activities
- Talk to a person you feel comfortable with
- Take deep breaths and practice deep breathing
- Find time to relax and chill out
- Take one thing at a time
- Do something for others
- Set small, realistic goals to help you tackle obstacles
- Set aside a specific time each day for thinking about your problems. At other times try to put off worrying about things until your scheduled time.
- Write things down in a diary or journal
- Ask for support and help from your family, friends, church or other community resources when you need it.
- Join or develop a support group – sharing experiences with others who understand is often useful

Where could I go for extra help?

There are many places that you can go to get extra help to assist you to overcome your situation.

- Your treating institution – talk to your oncologist, nurse or social worker.
- onTrac@PeterMac
- Your GP
- Your local Community Health Centre
- A psychologist

You may also find some additional information and helpful hints from the following web sites.

- www.mentalhealthvic.org.au
- www.cancervic.org.au
- www.adavic.org
- www.stressbusting.co.uk

Sources

The National Mental Health Strategy. What are Anxiety Disorders? Fact Sheet.

Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service. Fears & Anxieties. Information Brochure.

The Centre for Psychological and Relationship Counselling (2004). Panic Disorder Fact Sheet.