

FACT SHEET:

Category:

Mental Health

Audience:

Person with an ABI;
Family and Support
Workers; and
Professionals

For more information
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ABIOS Neuropsychologist



ABIOS

Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

Anxiety and Brain Injury

What is anxiety?

It is normal to feel anxious or worried from time to time. In fact it can be helpful in some situations. For example, think about how you might react if a lion approached you. You would probably respond with fear. Your brain would send messages to the body to get ready to physically fight (fight response), or to run away from the situation (flight response). This experience of fear is part of helping us survive.

Anxiety is common in less threatening situations too. For example, it can be normal to feel anxious before a job interview or speaking in front of a group of people. This type of anxiety can sometimes be a good thing as it pumps people up ready to perform. Normal worry is relatively short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour.



Worry or anxiety is unhelpful when it relates to a number of things, occurs often, is extreme for the situation and stops you from doing things that need to be done. Anxiety can be experienced in different ways. Feelings of worry, fear or apprehension may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as a racing heart, butterflies in the stomach, rapid breathing, sweating or shaking, and muscle tension.

How common are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety Disorders are very common. 1 in 4 people will experience an anxiety disorder at some stage of their life. After a brain injury, it is estimated that between 18% and 60% of people will experience an anxiety disorder. The most common anxiety disorders experienced after a brain injury are post traumatic stress disorder and generalised anxiety disorder.

What are the Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders?

There are many types of anxiety disorders and each has different symptoms. This factsheet will discuss three common conditions: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder (PD), and Social Anxiety. For information on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder see the fact sheet on this topic.



Generalised Anxiety

People with this disorder worry constantly about many different things that are often out of their control e.g. finances, health, work or personal relationships. The worry is difficult to manage and interferes with the ability to focus on activities. It can also be accompanied by feelings of tension, irritability, restlessness and difficulty sleeping.

Panic Disorder

Panic attacks consist of a frightening set of physical symptoms that may include;

- heart palpitations
- Sweating
- shakiness or trembling
- shortness of breath
- feelings of choking, chest pain, nausea, dizziness
- feelings of detachment or unreality
- fear of losing control
- fear of dying
- numbness or tingling, and hot or cold flashes

Panic attacks have a sudden onset and usually peak within 10 minutes. Often people describe feeling a strong sense of dread or doom. A panic attack may include anxiety about being in a situation where escape is difficult (such as being in a crowd or on a bus). Sometimes panic attacks can occur without a clear trigger and can occur from sleep. A person who has panic disorder often lives in fear of having another panic attack, and may be afraid to be away from home or far from medical help.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety disorder or social phobia is used to describe anxiety and fear arising from being in social situations, such as meeting new people, talking in front of others, being watched while doing something (eating, drinking, writing your name). People with social anxiety worry that they will be negatively evaluated or judged by others. They may also worry about doing something embarrassing or offending another person. This fear is accompanied by physical symptoms of anxiety, such as increased heart rate and changes in breathing, feeling shaky, sweating etc. The social situations are usually avoided (e.g. not going to parties, having a friend or family member speak on their behalf).



Anxiety After a Brain Injury

The causes of anxiety disorders are not fully understood. Some of the factors that contribute to anxiety include; genetics, chemical imbalances and structural changes in the brain. A brain injury may make someone more likely to experience an anxiety disorder due to the impact the injury has on the brain and the changes in thinking, behaviour and emotions that can occur. People who have low self-esteem and difficulty coping may also be more prone to anxiety disorders.

There can be some overlap between anxiety symptoms and changes after a brain injury, so it is important to speak to your GP or a mental health professional who understands brain injury if you think that you may have an anxiety disorder. Anxiety can impact on everyday tasks, relationships, wellbeing, and your recovery after a brain injury, so it is important to seek treatment.

How are Anxiety Disorders Treated?

Psychological therapy offers the most successful form of treatment for many anxiety disorders. Therapy typically involves learning strategies that help a person relax and manage the physical symptoms of anxiety, talking through and identify issues causing the anxiety, as well as strategies for facing fears and dealing with worrying thoughts.

Because this approach targets the underlying problem, it offers hope of a cure rather than temporary symptom relief. Treatment may also involve taking medication for a period of time. However, psychological therapy is more effective than drugs in managing anxiety disorders in the long term. Speak to your GP if you would like to be referred to a psychologist.

Resources

See other Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service (ABIOS) Information sheets at <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/>

Specifically see our '**Relaxation after ABI**' fact sheet for some relaxation tips and exercises.



Notes:
