

# TAMING FEAR & ANXIETY

## Part I: How To Tell If Your Fear And Anxiety Are Normal



by  
Frank P. Mancuso, Ph.D.  
Director of

*The Center for Christian  
Counseling & Relationship  
Development, L.L.C.*

Fear and anxiety can capture your mind and enslave your heart. The pain of it all can engulf your soul and imprison your spirit. Eventually, hope and even faith give way to the overwhelming burdens of the relentless taskmasters. In the end, you sadly or angrily resign yourself to the commands of their mysterious and powerful force. You recognize that your life is not your own, that you cannot live as you wish or go back to the way it was before.

***“How do I make it stop? I have to get control over my life. Maybe I should pray more or have more faith. I’ve tried so many things. God, please help me!”***

We all experience fear and anxiety from time to time. They are normal emotions in a fallen world. They can be beneficial when they tell us of impending danger (such as screeching car brakes) and give us the chance to protect ourselves. However, it is not normal when these feelings become chronic, overwhelming, and significantly affect your relationships, school or work.

How do you know when average anxiety has crossed the line and become excessive? Where do panic, anxieties, and phobias come from? What is the role of obsessions and compulsions, which may accompany them? Is there help available?

Let's take the first question first. Do any of these statements sound like you?

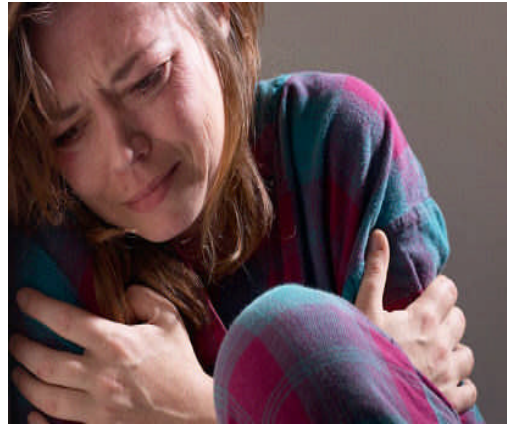
- You fear losing control, going crazy or dying.
- You have problems with sweating, trembling, palpitations or dizziness.
- You avoid specific objects, places or situations---germs, open spaces or people.
- You experience unwanted thoughts or feelings that take over your life.
- You feel restless, fatigued or irritable or have difficulty with sleep and muscle tension.
- You persistently reexperience a traumatic event and are easily startled.
- You engage in repetitive, ritualistic behaviors---counting, ordering or checking.

If any of these statements are familiar, take a few minutes to read further to better understand what are fear and anxiety. You will also discover some of the common causes, and that you are far from being alone with these problems.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In psychology, fear and anxiety are sometimes used synonymously, but they are different. Fear is a distressing emotion in the presence of an actual dangerous situation or specific object (for instance, fear or phobia—of bridges, snakes, driving, etc.). The common response to fear is “fight” or “flight.” Anxiety, on the other hand, is a general feeling of dread or apprehension, and is not attached to anything in particular.<sup>1</sup>

Every year in the U.S. more than 40 million people suffer from some anxiety disorder that greatly impairs their lives. More than \$42 billion is spent annually on medical doctor visits and psychiatric hospitalizations, and related costs. About half of those who suffer from chronic anxiety simultaneously suffer from depression.<sup>2</sup> One study showed the incidence of cardiac disease is doubled for those having depression, but tripled with anxiety.<sup>3</sup>



## “HOW DID I GET LIKE THIS?”

Fear and anxiety can be brought on by life events, the use of drugs or medical conditions, such as hypoglycemia or hyperventilation. Below is a partial list of some of the more common psychological reasons people experience fear and anxiety:

- Unresolved or chronic guilt always leads to the expectation of punishment.
- The loss of important relationships through rejection, abandonment or death.
- Losing control of feelings or impulses, such as sexual or aggressive.
- Pessimistic, negative self-statements that undermine our confidence.
- Failed attempts to be perfect.
- Being embarrassed, shamed, or humiliated.
- Anger or rage in us and/or others.
- Feeling insecure or unsafe.



Sometimes fear is driven by past experience. For instance, if a child pets a cat and the cat scratches the child, he or she will associate pain and perhaps fear with cats, and the feeling will govern how he or she responds to cats in the future. We all do this to a certain extent, associating feelings with places, objects or people who caused us great emotional upheaval.

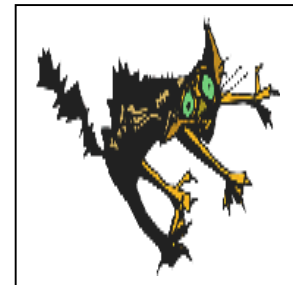
Guilt can also generate anxiety if a person has an overly developed and sensitive conscience. A man brought up with too many rules and restrictions can feel there is a proper way to live life—and when life deviates from that ideal, it causes guilt. A woman who requires a great deal of structure to live her life securely may overstuff her conscience with unnecessary and harmful rules, which inevitably are broken. The result for either of these

individuals can be chronic and overwhelming guilt, as well as fear of being punished for breaking the "rules", which leads to a general feeling of anxiety.

## YOU ARE NOT ALONE

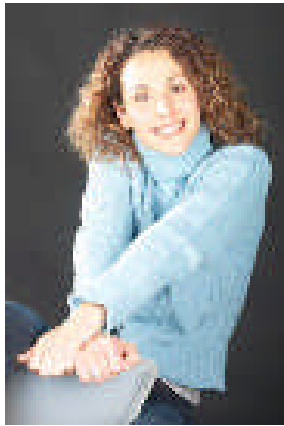
You may find the following statistical information on these anxiety disorders interesting and helpful.

- **Generalized anxiety** (excessive worry associated with fatigue, irritability, and sleep problems) affects women 66% more often than men. About 5% of the population has the disorder.<sup>5</sup> About 25% of those afflicted will eventually develop a panic disorder.<sup>4</sup>
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** is as common in adult men as adult women. It involves unreasonable and repetitive thoughts about things like an extreme need for cleanliness or fear of disease.



- Inherent in the condition is the compulsion to engage in ritualistic behavior (counting, praying, hoarding, rechecking locks and appliances) in order to give some relief from the unending anxious thoughts. Eighty percent of those with OCD experience onset before age 35. The most frequent age of onset for males is between 6 and 15, for females between 20 and 29. For most people, the symptoms wax and wane. Many keep their disorder secret for five to ten years before they seek help. About 70% experience depression during their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>
- **Panic** (extreme fear coupled with physical symptoms, like sweating, racing heart, hyperventilation) is two to three times as common in females as males, and is up to seven times more likely to occur to individuals whose parents have the disorder.<sup>4</sup> Panic is sometimes accompanied by **agoraphobia** (the need to escape from open spaces to a place of safety.)
  - **Personality disorders** that include anxiety and/or fear are paranoia and avoidance. The symptoms of **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**—emotionally re-experiencing a life-threatening traumatic event, such as war or rape) usually appear within three months of the trauma, but may not show up for as long as 30 years.<sup>5</sup>
  - Typically, **social phobia** (excessive fear of being rejected, humiliated or embarrassed by others) begins in the mid-teens, but can begin in childhood as shyness. Often the duration of the disorder is life-long. Sometime in their lives, 13% of adults experience social anxiety.<sup>6</sup>
  - More females experience **specific phobias** (75% - 90% fear certain animals) and are also most prone to situational phobias (bridges, flying, etc.). Often those suffering from situational phobias experience a peak fear in childhood and again in their mid-20s.<sup>3</sup>

## CAN I BE FIXED?



If you are suffering from fear and/or anxiety, you likely have repeatedly asked yourself, “Can I be cured or do I have to live with this for the rest of my life?” You have probably tried many things to rid yourself of the physical, emotional and spiritual symptoms that have worn you out in the never-ending struggle to overcome them. All you want is peace.

There is help available. Many of the disorders described in this article are treatable. Success is not guaranteed, but most find at least some help in relieving their fear and anxiety through talk therapy that may or may not include medication.

Numerous factors affect treatment success and how long it will take. Counseling works best when a counselor is experienced and competent and a client is educated about his or her condition, intelligent, participates in the process and likes the counselor.

Most people troubled by these disorders will experience at least a partial recovery, while some will have almost complete recovery. Even a 5-10% improvement is valuable, especially if you can duplicate that improvement by trying new remedies. Resolution of simple issues that generate anxiety and fear may require only a handful of counseling sessions; those who have chronic general anxiety or are obsessive-compulsive may require months or years of therapy.

Just having a diagnosis is a great relief to many people. Putting a label on the problem gives some hope—if it is understood, perhaps it can be changed. Insight-oriented treatment can bring significant relief by helping clients gain understanding about the issues that underlie their fear and anxiety.

You can find out what you can do to free yourself from the grip of excessive fear or anxiety by reading “Taming Fear and Anxiety Part II: Treatments That Work,” which is under Library/Therapeutic Articles. This article contains the latest medical, psychological and spiritual approaches to resolving these troubled emotions.

---

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Reber, Arthur S. (1995). *Dictionary of Psychology*. London: Penguin Books.
- <sup>2</sup> Anxiety Disorders Association of America (1990). Retrieved April 13, 2009, from <http://www.adaa.org/AboutADAA/PressRoom/Stats&Facts.asp>.
- <sup>3</sup> Miller, Michael Craig, Editor (2006). Mind and Mood After a heart attack. *Harvard Mental health Letter*, 22(8), 1.
- <sup>4</sup> American Psychiatric Association (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*. Washington, DC.
- <sup>5</sup> Miller, Michael Craig, Editor (2003). After the trauma: What doesn't help and what may. *Harvard Mental health Letter*, 20(5), 4-5.
- <sup>6</sup> Miller, Michael Craig, Editor (2003). Beyond shyness and stage fright: social anxiety disorder. *Harvard Mental health Letter*, 20(4), 1-4.