

Q & A Mindline



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Q I am a General Physician with a small but busy practice in India. I would like to know the typical presenting features of anxiety and how it can be differentiated from the general feelings of stress or anxiousness?

I am glad that a general physician (GP) is taking a keen interest in the practical and better management of patients with emotional and mental health problems.

According to a WHO study, at least 30 per cent of the GP consultations have a direct and an obvious psychological factor, concerning depressive condition, somatoform disorder or anxiety.

Anxiety disorder presentation depends on the nature of disorders. For example, in generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), an individual will present with non-specific pervasive anxiety with catastrophic thoughts that is not a situation or trigger-specific. Whereas, in panic disorders, one will experience a sudden severe bout of anxiety with marked physical symptoms such tremors, palpitation, chest discomfort and shortness of breath.

In phobic disorder there is situation-specific anxiety - for example, fear of heights or enclosed spaces or animals. Hypochondriasis presents with unremitting anxiety of developing

sinister ailments, a concern that will last despite negative examination and investigations. Stress-related anxiety will commonly present with psychosomatic features such as headaches, body aches, dizzy spells, abdominal discomfort and insomnia, etc.

Remember, anxiety may be a manifesting feature of underlying medical conditions like irregular heart rhythm (arrhythmia), heart diseases, thyroid problems, low haemoglobin (anaemia), diabetes, infections, etc. In particular, a person with a panic attack will appear as though he has a heart attack, therefore it essential to consider and rule out heart ailments with the blood tests and ECG.

Factors that differentiate anxiety disorder from a general feeling of stress or anxiousness is its pervasive, unremitting and irrational nature. Anxiety related to stress is generally a temporary experience and remits with a change in our routine or relaxation. But when stress is relentless, it can precipitate breakdown and a vast array of physical and psychological ailments.

Q I have been experiencing sleep problems for years now, especially since I started working in shifts. How do I improve my sleep without taking addictive sleeping pills?

We seem to now live in a 24-hour society with many doing shift work mainly in the service industry like IT, catering to the so-called 'international clients.' Shift work or erratic pattern of working is badly blurring the work-life boundaries and sleep-wake rhythm. People carry work home and continue to work until they drop off to bed at a variable time to a poor sleep pattern.

Many are exposed to devices that emit bright lights that confuse the human brain and sleep patterns. Alongside we are bombarded with information overload from the internet and social



media that contributes to our already crowded mind and limited ability to relax and unwind. Our fast-paced automated life allows little time for relaxation unwinding, introspection and connection to things around us. Our mind is always on active mode, so unsurprisingly we cannot get that much-needed sleep.

Sleep can be improved by actively prioritising, planning and pursuing sleep. It's necessary to set up sleep hygiene by doing the following: reduce consumption of stimulating food and beverages such as chocolates, tea and coffee. Take a bath and put on fresh clothes before bedtime. You should also avoid late night meals as there should be a gap of at least 2-3 hours between dinner and bedtime. Make sure that the environment of the bedroom is warm and pleasant with dim lighting.

Take regular breaks and time off from work, including holidays away from home to refresh and rejuvenate. Ensure adequate exposure to sunlight, besides regular exercise and activities. Slow down and connect with things around you. Finally, discontinue shift work if possible or change your job and join a company where they offer more social working hours, one that synchronises with other aspects of life.