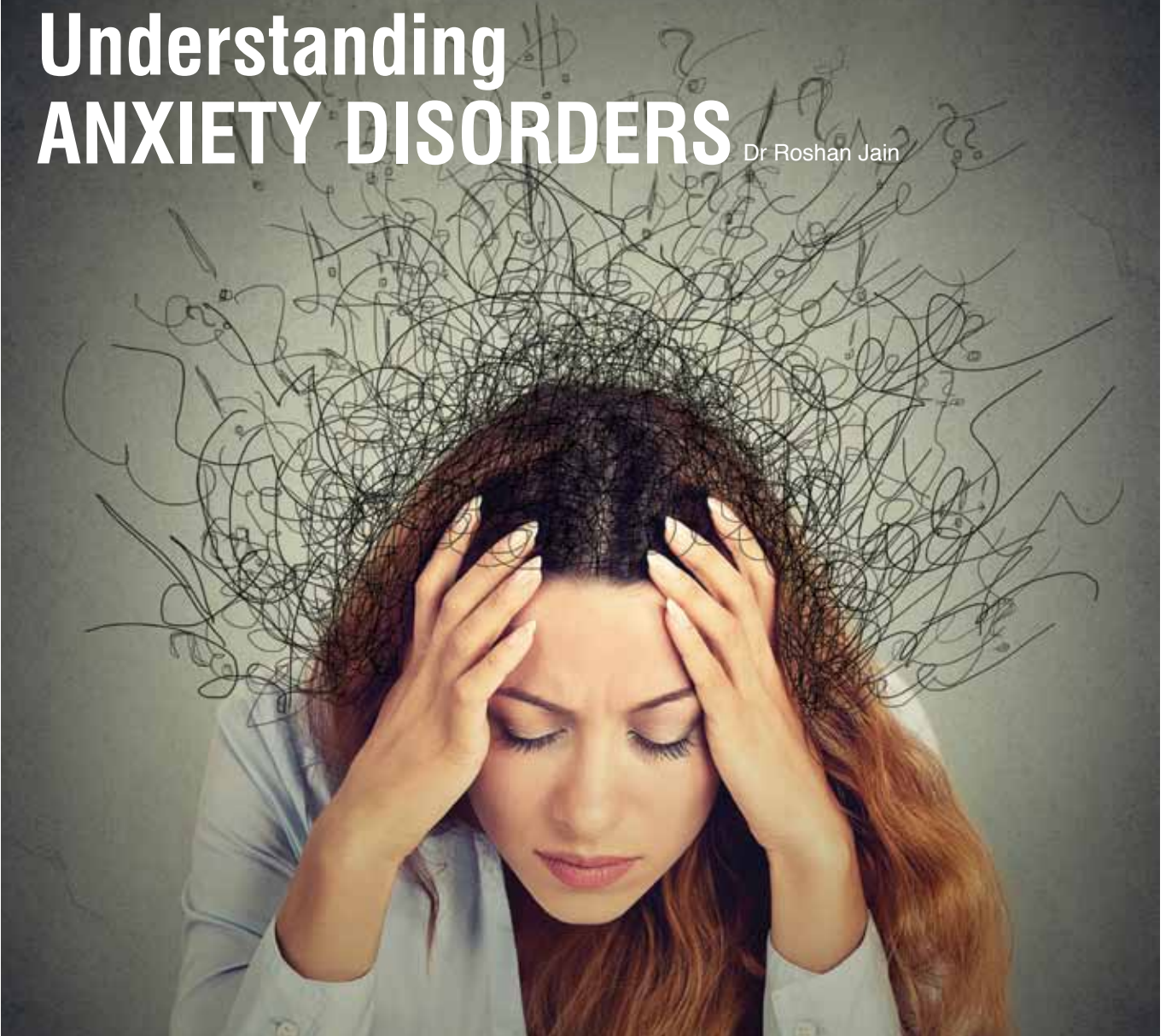


Understanding ANXIETY DISORDERS

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We live in a dynamic, ever changing and challenging environment, and this can often lead to stress. It is normal to feel anxious from time to time, especially if you live a stressful life (which inevitably applies to many of us). Anxiety can be about upcoming exams or interview, life change or event, relationships, finances, or getting nervous about social gatherings etc. Contrary to common myths, anxiety is normal, perhaps even helpful. In moderation,

it may give us a boost of energy or help us focus. i.e. it can mobilise an anticipatory and adaptive response to a challenge or stressful events.

However, for many people, anxiety is a constant companion, always lurking around the corner. It is considered excessive or pathological when it arises in the absence of challenge or stress, when it is disproportionate (in duration and severity) to underlying problem or stress, or when it results in significant distress with associated psychological, social, occupational, biological, and other impairment.

In simple word, excess anxiety can destabilise the individual and result in a dysfunctional state. And when anxiety and nervousness become relentless and continuous, they are deemed as 'disorders', which can be overwhelming.

According to WHO, anxiety disorders are among one of the most prevalent mental and behavioural problems in the world, estimated to affect 3.6 per cent of the global population or about 264 million people. Figures are somewhat similar in India. Worldwide, the prevalence of anxiety disorder is higher in females than in males.

General Feelings of Nervousness V/S Anxiety Disorders

Nervousness and anxiety is a subjective feeling of being in a state of worry, fear, unease, apprehension or discomfort often accompanied by physical features such as awareness of heartbeat, trembling, sweating, headache, etc. Anxiety is expected when a person responds to a real or potential danger. The factors that differentiate nervousness from an anxiety disorder, is its pervasive, unremitting, disproportionate and irrational nature.

Anxiety related to stress is generally a temporary experience and remits with a change in our routine or following relaxation. However, when pressure is relentless, it can precipitate breakdown and a vast array of physical and psychological ailments.

There are different type of anxiety disorder, and therefore their presentation will differ. For example, in Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) individual will present generalised non-specific continuous anxiety with catastrophic thoughts that are not a situation or triggers specific. Whereas, in Panic disorders, one will experience a sudden severe bout of anxiety with marked physical features such tremors, palpitation (awareness of heartbeat), chest discomfort and shortness of breath, alongside intense apprehension



about fear of passing out, losing control or dying. In Phobic disorder, there is situation specific anxiety, for example, fear of heights or enclosed spaces or animal. Obsessive-compulsive disorder present with intrusive irrational thoughts with compulsive behaviour to resolves the worries followed by re-emergence of those thoughts. Hypochondriasis (a form of health phobia) presents with unremitting anxiety of developing sinister ailments, a concern that lasts despite unremarkable examination and investigations by medical professionals. Stress related anxiety will commonly present with psychosomatic (bodily manifestation of psychological problems) features such as headaches, body aches, dizzy spells, abdominal discomfort and insomnia, etc.

Anxiety And Medical Conditions

Remember, anxiety may be a manifesting feature of underlying medical conditions like irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia), poor heart circulation (ischaemic heart diseases), thyroid problems, low haemoglobin (anaemia), diabetes, infections, etc. Therefore, necessary medical evaluation and investigation is warranted during diagnostic assessment before considering it as being psychological.

Besides, one may experience anxiety after being informed of a medical condition. For example, if one is diagnosed with cancer, he/she is bound to be anxious and apprehensive, but may adapt to reality after requisite medical counselling and information about treatment and prognosis. Equally, someone with irregular heart rhythm may be experiencing racing or missed heartbeat, and those feelings and fear may last even after corrective intervention. In other words, secondary anxiety may be treated with reassurance, education and information or may require a short course of anti-anxiety or antidepressant therapy.

Associated Health Hazards

Research has established that being anxious and depressed increases the risk of heart disease and stroke as much as smoking and obesity. A recent study showed that people with high levels of anxiety and depression are at 65 per cent higher risk of a heart condition, 64 per cent for stroke, 50 per cent for high blood pressure and 87 per cent for arthritis. These conditions receive limited attention from general physicians.

Challenges With Mental Health Problems

Mental disorders in general still carry a lot of stigma, especially in India, and thus can lead to neglect and marginalization. Despite digitization and data flow, there is still a lack of awareness of common mental health problems, which can hinder one's ability to seek help. This leads to unnecessary suffering and slower response to treatment. Individuals are merely ignoring emotional health and wellness over other physical necessities!

Questions To Ask

Did your doctor ever explore your psychological health, and if so, did they identify emotional difficulties? Do they then advise on managing it, or recommended seeing a specialist who can help?

Have you ever considered emotional hygiene? Do you tend to ignore emotional wellness over other less relevant aspects of life?

Do you know anyone who may be suffering from anxiety? Have you ever suggested them to address it, sooner rather than later?



Pragmatic Advice On Managing Anxiety

Anxiety builds on worry and tension and when one experiences unremitting anxiety, an individual to worry about worrying! Let go of things that seem unresolvable and allow solutions to unravel.

We endure life difficulties for too long before considering the remedy. We must accept we are vulnerable to stress, tension and anxiety.

Take regular breaks from daily regimented grind and routine, be it at work or other aspects of your life. When you 'stop and think', it gives you a broader perspective and turns you to solution orientation.

Sleep deprivation is a health hazard leading to a wide array of problems including hypertension, heart problems, diabetes, and psychological problems like anxiety, depression and addictions. Prioritize sleep and ensure you get 7-8 hours per night. Sleep is designed for rest, recovery and rejuvenation.

Exercise is proven to be effective in anxiety and depression, especially when done for 30-45 minutes at least 4 day per week. As the saying goes, food is one of the most commonly abused anti-anxiety substances and exercise is the most under-utilized antidepressant. Let us reverse the trend.

Mindful Meditation can help you cultivate an ability to focus on things that matter and empty your mind if irrational clutter. Being mentally calmer from the outset will allow for a deeper perspective on an evolving situation.

Speaking about concerns, being heard and affirmations can have enormous therapeutic benefits. An apprehensive individual desire being listened to and understood. And a top-up with simple education and pragmatic advices will raise self-awareness and encourage an individual to consider remedial actions. It's better when done formally (in the form of counselling or psychotherapy)



with a professional as they will be independent, attentive, objective and offer timely advice, unlike family or friends who may provide guidance before listening to you.



For some, a short course of low dose tranquilizing medication (Lorazepam or clonazepam) may help break the cycle of anxiety and apprehension along with physical features, which gets psychological re-enforcement. Be cautious, as tranquillizers are addictive especially when taken daily for 4-6 weeks, and may not be suitable for those with addictive behaviour or severe breathing difficulties.

Anti-depressants are non-addictive and safer but are required to be taken for 6-12 weeks after an initial episode. Research has established their effectiveness in a wide array of anxiety and depressive disorders. Importantly, there is sufficient data to suggest that a combination of antidepressant and psychotherapy is more effective than either one alone.