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Anxiety Disorders: The Role of Psychotherapy in Effective Treatment

Everyone feels anxious and under stress from time to time. Situations such as meeting tight deadlines, important social obligations or driving in heavy traffic, often bring about anxious feelings. Such mild anxiety may help make you alert and focused on facing threatening or challenging circumstances. On the other hand, anxiety disorders cause severe distress over a period of time and disrupt the lives of individuals suffering from them. The frequency and intensity of anxiety involved in these disorders is often debilitating. But fortunately, with proper and effective treatment, people suffering from anxiety disorders can lead normal lives.

What are the major kinds of anxiety disorders?

There are several major types of anxiety disorders, each with its own characteristics.

- People with generalized anxiety disorder have recurring fears or worries, such as about health or finances, and they often have a persistent sense that something bad is just about to happen. The reason for the intense feelings of anxiety may be difficult to identify. But the fears and worries are very real and often keep individuals from concentrating on daily tasks.
- Panic disorder involves sudden, intense and unprovoked feelings of terror and dread. People who suffer from this disorder generally develop strong fears about when and where their next panic attack will occur, and they often restrict their activities as a result.

- A related disorder involves phobias, or intense fears, about certain objects or situations. Specific phobias may involve things such as encountering certain animals or flying in airplanes, whereas social phobias involve fear of social settings or public places.
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder is characterized by persistent, uncontrollable and unwanted feelings or thoughts (obsessions) and routines or rituals in which individuals engage to try to prevent or rid themselves of these thoughts (compulsions). Examples of common compulsions include washing hands or cleaning house excessively for fear of germs, or checking over something repeatedly for errors.
- Someone who suffers severe physical or emotional trauma such as from a natural disaster or serious accident or crime may experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns become seriously affected by reminders of the event, sometimes months or even years after the traumatic experience.

Symptoms such as shortness of breath, racing heartbeat, trembling and dizziness often accompany certain anxiety disorders such as panic and generalized anxiety disorders. Although they may begin at any time, anxiety disorders often surface in adolescence or early adulthood. There is some evidence of a genetic or family predisposition to certain anxiety disorders.

Why is it important to seek treatment for these disorders?

If left untreated, anxiety disorders can have severe consequences. For example, some people who suffer from recurring panic attacks avoid at all costs putting themselves in a situation that they fear may trigger an attack. Such avoidance behavior may create problems by conflicting with job requirements, family obligations or other basic activities of daily living.

Many people who suffer from an untreated anxiety disorder are prone to other psychological disorders, such as depression, and they have a greater tendency to abuse alcohol and other drugs. Their relationships with family members, friends and coworkers may become very strained. And their job performance may falter.

Are there effective treatments available for anxiety disorders?

Absolutely. Most cases of anxiety disorder can be treated successfully by appropriately trained health and mental health care professionals.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, research has demonstrated that both "behavioral therapy" and "cognitive therapy" can be highly effective in treating anxiety disorders. Behavioral therapy involves using techniques to reduce or stop the undesired behavior associated with these disorders. For example, one approach involves training patients in relaxation and deep breathing techniques to counteract the agitation and hyperventilation (rapid, shallow breathing) that accompany certain anxiety disorders.

Through cognitive therapy, patients learn to understand how their thoughts contribute to the symptoms of anxiety disorders, and how to change those thought patterns to reduce the likelihood of occurrence and the intensity of reaction. The patient's increased cognitive awareness is often combined with behavioral techniques to help the individual gradually confront and tolerate fearful situations in a controlled, safe environment.

Proper and effective medications may have a role in treatment along with psychotherapy. In cases where medications are used, the patient's care may be managed collaboratively by a therapist and physician. It is important for patients to realize that there are side effects to any drugs, which must be monitored closely by the prescribing physician.

How can a qualified therapist help someone suffering from an anxiety disorder?

Licensed psychologists are highly qualified to diagnose and treat anxiety disorders. Individuals suffering from these disorders should seek a provider who is competent in cognitive and behavioral therapies. Experienced mental health professionals have the added benefit of having helped other patients recover from anxiety disorders.

Family psychotherapy and group psychotherapy (typically involving individuals who are not related to one another) offer helpful approaches to treatment for some patients with anxiety disorders. In addition, mental health clinics or other specialized treatment programs dealing with specific disorders such as panic or phobias may also be available nearby.

How long does psychological treatment take?

It is very important to understand that treatments for anxiety disorders do not work instantly. The patient should be comfortable from the outset with the general treatment being proposed and with the therapist with whom he or she is working. The patient's cooperation is crucial, and there must be a strong sense that the patient and therapist are collaborating as a team to remedy the anxiety disorder.

No one plan works well for all patients. Treatment needs to be tailored to the needs of the patient and to the type of disorder, or disorders, from which the individual suffers. A therapist and patient should work together to assess whether a treatment plan seems to be on track. Adjustments to the plan sometimes are necessary, since patients respond differently to treatment.

Many patients will begin to improve noticeably within eight to ten sessions, especially those who carefully follow the outlined treatment plan.

There is no question that the various kinds of anxiety disorders can severely impair a person's functioning in work, family and social environments. But the prospects for long-term recovery for most individuals who seek appropriate professional help are very good. Those who suffer from anxiety disorders can work with a qualified and experienced therapist such as a licensed psychologist to help them regain control of their feelings and thoughts -- and their lives.