

ANXIETY



To those of us 'working in welfare' interacting with clients who are experiencing anxiety is nothing new. However, it is always good to revise and review our knowledge and skills. Anxiety is not, of course, just experienced by our clients but also by us, both in our working and private lives.

Some anxiety is natural and useful and is part of everyone's makeup. A certain amount of anxiety is necessary to ensure that we are cautious and take care in risky situations. Anxiety therefore helps ensure that we survive!

Anxiety becomes a problem when there is a persistent, excessive, unreasonable fear of a specific object, activity or situation that results in a compelling desire to avoid that object, activity or situation. The fear is recognised by an individual as excessive and unreasonable. The avoidance behaviour involves some degree of disability.

Because we are all different, in any situation some people will start to feel anxious sooner than others.

HOW WILL A PERSON RECOGNISE THAT HE/SHE IS ANXIOUS?

Anxiety affects the body and mind and may be experienced as an expectation of danger in:-

Physical symptoms - including	feeling 'butterflies' inside nausea and diarrhoea increased heart rate and pounding heart increased breathing rate
Mental/emotional symptoms including	feeling tension and apprehension having anxious, repetitive thoughts awareness of surroundings
Behavioural symptoms including	checking work done or preparations made avoiding situations or places developing rituals around some tasks

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

There are many theories about excessive, persistent or unreasonable anxiety, but they may be summed up as:-

- Expecting that the worst will happen
- Assuming that you will not be able to cope when the worst does happen

This may be caused by:-

- Genetic legacy - an anxious disposition
- Life experiences
- Learned anxiety - listening to other people's experiences

Understanding the roots of your anxiety can be a step in controlling it.

HOW CAN A PERSON MANAGE ANXIETY?

There are many different things a person can do to reduce their anxiety. The first step is to start recognising and acknowledging anxiety. Consider how and when the anxiety started. This may help to understand specific worries. If, when a person feels anxious, stressed or afraid, he/she tries to:-

- # Breakdown the anxiety into small parts and consider how to manage each part
- # Counting to 10 or to 100!
- # Using breathing exercises - draw breath deeply into the lungs, keeping the upper chest still, counting up to 6, breathe out slowly, counting to 8 as one does so
- # Continue to breathe in this way until one feels calmer
- # Listening to the messages in one's head - a person may be winding themselves up
- # Thinking of some useful messages 'Take it easy' ... I don't need to panic' ... 'stay calm'
- # Not catastrophizing - exaggerating an unpleasant situation into a disaster
- # Stopping the chain of negative thoughts by doing something else - move around - exercise - make something to eat or drink - talk to someone

WHAT ELSE CAN A PERSON DO?

- Change their diet** - cut down on caffeine and sugar
ensure stable blood sugar by eating complex carbohydrates - bread, potatoes, pasta and rice
- avoid processed foods, cheese and chocolate that may produce allergies that encourage anxiety
- Improve lifestyle** - take exercise, have interests and a social life but not so much that it induces stress
- reduce or give up smoking
- pace oneself so that he/she feels in control
- Relax** - learn and practise relaxation, including breathing exercises

WHEN SHOULD FURTHER HELP BE SOUGHT

Many people manage anxiety successfully by using their own strategies, and taking support from friends, family and colleagues. But sometimes support is not available or it is difficult to understand what is happening. At this point a person should consider seeking help in the form of counselling.

HOW CAN COUNSELLING HELP?

Counselling offers a totally confidential and professional tool to help manage anxieties. It can:

- Provide a safe, neutral setting for a person to talk through their situation and to make sense of what is happening
- Offer information and guidance on coping with anxiety
- Explore the underlying reasons for the anxiety experienced and offer support whilst a person plans ways to help themselves
- Refer on to external specialists where appropriate

If a person is suffering from anxiety which is adversely affecting their life, then talking through their situation with a counsellor, sooner rather than later, can mean that a person can learn to manage the anxiety and, when appropriate, to bring about change.

Those of us who are in a position to offer counselling, know its true value. Those of us who utilise counselling skills must take special care to know when to refer on to a qualified practitioner. Together those of us 'working in welfare' are able to assist those suffering from anxiety.