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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #002:

THE MANY FACES OF ANXIETY

Anxiety, regardless of a person's psychological or biological makeup, is highly common. Although it can be triggered by a specific event, such as a trauma or stressful situation, anxiety can also present as a consistent theme in a person's life, creating challenges in daily activities or interactions.

Despite the debilitating symptoms that anxiety can lead to, it is treatable. With the support of friends and family, as well as a combination of counselling, self-care techniques, and a doctor's advice, people with anxiety can lead healthier, happier lives.

If you're suffering from anxiety, support from EFAP providers, physicians, and primary care practitioners is crucial. Here are the facts you need to know about the many faces of anxiety, including the signs and symptoms, and what you can do to put yourself on the road to recovery.

The main types of anxiety disorders

Anxiety comes in many forms, and is highly dependent on the existing physical, emotional, and psychological stressors in your life.[1] Typically, anxiety can be classified into six categories:

1. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).** One of the most common forms of anxiety, this disorder is typically characterized by chronic, persistent, and severe feelings of anxiousness, panic, fear, tension, and worry without immediate provocation, or the ability to identify the source of these feelings.
2. **Panic Disorder.** Characterized as a condition consisting of persistent panic attacks, panic disorder is accompanied by extreme and unexpected fear, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, dizziness, and nausea.

3. **Agoraphobia.** Characterized as fear and avoidance of places or situations that might cause a person to panic or feel trapped, helpless, or embarrassed. Often accompanied by Panic Disorder because people come to fear places in which they have had a panic attack.

4. **Social Anxiety Disorder.** Characterized by excessive self-consciousness in everyday situations to the point of developing a social phobia. People with extreme forms of Social Anxiety Disorder may endeavor to avoid social events at all cost.

5. **Separation Anxiety Disorder.** Though this typically affects children who are separated from their parents, this disorder can affect adults with equal severity, and involves a fear or anxiety of being separated from a loved one. Separation anxiety can occur due to a separation in any relationship, including friends, loved ones, and even pets.

6. **Phobias.**[2] Classified based on the extreme fear of a person, thing, archetype, or abstract concept. These fears typically develop in early childhood, but may develop later in life based on a traumatic incident or stressful situation. Phobias can get in the way of a person's daily life, if the subject of the phobia is persistently present.

Though anxiety disorders typically develop in a person's 20s or 30s, they can be triggered at any point in a person's life, especially if a traumatic or stressful event has occurred. If a person has an existing genetic predisposition to mental health issues, the likelihood of developing a form of anxiety is higher than if no predisposition is present. In addition, a person can have a combination of several anxiety disorders simultaneously.

The signs, symptoms, and causes

Although genetic predisposition, traumatic events, and current life circumstances are all factors in the development of an anxiety disorder, the exact cause of anxiety disorders is relatively unknown. Therefore, the diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders can only be properly assessed on a case by case basis.

If symptoms persist over a few months, or if the anxiety elevates in severity, an anxiety disorder is typically present.[3] These symptoms can include:

- Panic, fear, and a persistent sense of uneasiness
- Sleep issues
- An inability to stay calm or still, especially in a stressful situation
- Tingling in the hands, feet, and other limbs
- Cold or clammy skin
- Shortness of breath
- Tension in the joints or muscle tissue
- Dry mouth
- Nausea
- Localized pain, especially in the jaw, neck, and chest

If you have any of the above symptoms, and suspect that you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder, speak to your doctor or a mental health professional with the capability of making a definitive diagnosis.

The long term effects

If left untreated, anxiety can take a definite toll on the physical and mental health of the individual, and its impact can cause issues with attention, memory, neurological impulses, and an overall sense of health and well-being.

Persistent, untreated anxiety can have long term repercussions on several aspects of the body, including:[4]

1. **The Central Nervous System.** Elevated levels of stress over an extended period of time can increase hormone distribution throughout the body, resulting in weight gain and hormonal issues.

2. **The Cardiovascular System.** Increased heart rate and difficulty breathing can increase the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and various coronary events.

3. **The Excretory and Digestive System.** Stomach aches, loss of appetite, and digestive issues are all contributing factors to the development of chronic digestive issues, such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).

4. **The Immune System.** Acute stress has been linked to weakening the immune system, leaving anxiety sufferers more vulnerable to infections and illnesses.

5. **The Respiratory System.** Rapid, shallow breathing can worsen symptoms related to asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

Anxiety can affect anyone of any gender, race, or background. However, research indicates that anxiety disorders typically affect women more prevalently. In Canada, of the 0.7% to 1.5% of the population affected, the majority are women, and in the United States, women are twice as likely to develop an anxiety disorder as their male counterparts. Overall, an estimated 1 in 10 Canadians are affected by an anxiety disorder, and 18% of the population are affected in the United States.

Getting Help

In all cases where anxiety is concerned, support is crucial. Most people with anxiety will find that having a strong, supportive environment helps in their journey towards a happier, healthier life, free from anxiety.[5] If you're suffering from anxiety, be sure that you're surrounded by friends, family, and colleagues that support your mental health journey.

Treatment for anxiety is prescribed on a case to case basis[6], but the three most common treatments are:

1. **Talk therapy,** which involves receiving counselling services from but not limited to a licensed psychotherapist or psychologist.
2. **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy**, a form of talk therapy which involves identifying and changing any potentially harmful and unhealthy behaviours.[7] Talk therapy is the most effective intervention for overcoming and managing an anxiety disorder.
3. **Medication**, which is prescribed only when necessary by a licensed psychiatrist or doctor, and are only used in the case of some forms of anxiety or anxiety disorders.

Once an anxiety disorder is considered to be under control, or deemed manageable, it's crucial to practice forms of self-management in order to aid you in your recovery process. The process of managing anxiety is very individual, but will often include avoiding specific triggers that could elevate your stress levels, practicing relaxation techniques (e.g. meditation or yoga), speaking with supportive friends or peers, exercising, and continuing to check in with your therapist or medical professional on a regular basis.

Practicing self-care, whether it involves talking to friends, having a warm bath, or going to the gym, is an integral aspect of your recovery journey.

Conclusion

Although anxiety can feel debilitating, it doesn't have to get in the way of your everyday life. Recovery is all about patience: remember that it can take time before you start feeling a difference, especially if you've started to take medication. Give yourself the time and space to heal, and you'll find that the journey is ultimately more manageable.

With proper treatment, it's possible to recover from an anxiety disorder and live a healthier, more productive life, free from any fear or worry that might have once hindered you in having strong, stable sense of self.

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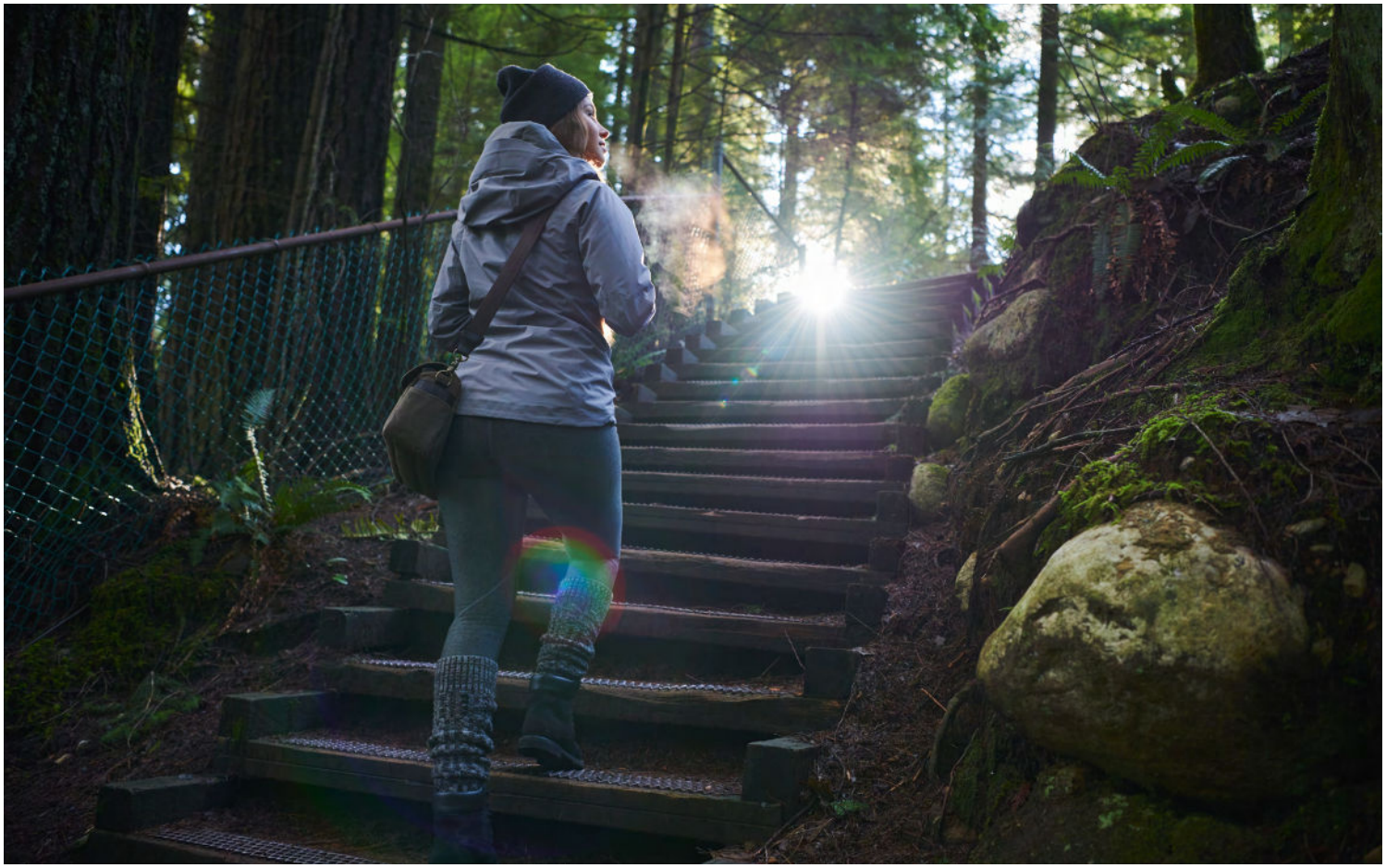

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