

## **Understanding Anxiety**

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV-TR) lists seven different anxiety disorders, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Panic Disorder, to name a few. Sometimes the differences amongst these diagnoses, as they present and manifest in a person, can be subtle and nuanced while at other times, the diagnosis is apparent, even to someone not in the field of mental health. Though it is important to understand that not all anxiety disorders are created equal, what might be most important is an understanding of the mechanisms of anxiety in the body and how this diagnosis can impact an individual on a daily basis.

Anxiety is thought to be caused by a dysregulation of neurotransmitters; in other words, the brain fails to manage effectively or appropriately the chemicals that are present in all of us (for example, serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine). A variety of treatments are available to help provide relief to those who suffer from any of the aforementioned anxiety diagnoses, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and/or medication. No one treatment has been proven to be the “most” effective; rather, it appears that the most useful and efficacious treatment is to combine both of these types. So, for an individual experiencing panic attacks and an extreme difficulty leaving their home (commonly referred to as Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia), combining talk and behavior therapy to reduce the frequency of the panic attacks AND providing medication to help “in the moment” of a panic attack is better than either approach individually.

Finally, in understanding anxiety, it is important to realize that as humans, our anxiety does not follow any sort of logical understanding. Our phobias of spiders or other things that have likely never done us harm, our worries about possibility of catastrophes happening to us or our loved ones, or our daily “little” anxieties don’t necessarily “make sense.” Though the reasons behind anxiety can seem more understandable when someone has undergone a major stressor or trauma (seeing combat or war, being attacked or mugged, or witnessing a frightening car accident), anxiety is anxiety. That is, it can be overwhelming and debilitating for the person who is experiencing it. Even if we as professionals or family members can’t necessarily understand it, providing empathy and support (especially in listening or helping the person find appropriate treatment) can mean a world of difference in that person’s daily functioning.