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## **Is Your Anxiety Something to Worry About?**

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“What? Me worry?” That famous tag line from Alfred E. Neumann of Mad Magazine fame underlines our curious relationship with anxiety. On the one hand, we seem to think that we shouldn’t worry because that indicates we are not sure of ourselves. On the other hand, when we feel sure of ourselves, we worry that we’re missing something. Like many areas in life, it is important to find a balance in our anxiety.

What is anxiety anyway? Anxiety or worry is the feeling we get when we are faced with uncertainty. When we face a big challenge or find ourselves in an unfamiliar place, we may be anxious about what will happen. Notice that anxiety is the anticipation of a negative outcome. Anxiety may be accompanied by unpleasant physical sensations such as an increase in heart rate, sweaty palms or facial perspiration, or the feeling of butterflies in the stomach.

Anxiety is not always a bad thing, though. It makes us examine what and how we are doing. For example, if I worry about a presentation I plan to make, I am more likely to spend time preparing and rehearsing. That’s a good thing. So, if we can’t eliminate our anxiety, how can we manage it? Too much anxiety can affect our sleep, our eating, our social life, and our ability to concentrate. It can be debilitating.

How we respond to anxiety-provoking life events is affected by a number of factors. Each person has a characteristic way of responding to the world which tends to stay consistent – our temperament. Each person has their own history of dealing with anxiety-provoking events – our experience. Finally, each person has a circle of people who provide support or not when we need it – our social network.

Sometimes our anxiety may be mild. I might worry about whether it will be sunny and hot or just hot tomorrow for the picnic I’ve planned and worked hard to produce. At other times, our anxiety may be severe. If I have been in a motor vehicle accident, I may be highly anxious about driving and avoid even getting into a car.

Our brain reacts to our experience of anxiety and produces chemicals (i.e., hormones and other neurotransmitters) that may make the reaction even stronger. People affected by panic disorder can go quickly from having a small anxiety reaction to feeling as if they may die because they can’t breathe or they feel their heart may stop. At other times, we only realize we are anxious because of the effect of a stress hormone, like that butterfly sensation.

People may experience traumatic events and have anxiety reactions that are triggered by things that remind them of the trauma. For example, someone who has been in a motor vehicle accident may have an anxiety reaction triggered by the sound of

squealing tires. While most people would just be annoyed at the noise, someone with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (an anxiety disorder) may experience a flashback where they feel that their motor vehicle accident is happening again.

Some people find themselves anxious in social settings. They are affected by social anxiety. Other people find themselves compelled to perform some ritual in order to calm down. They are affected by Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) which may provoke strong feelings of anxiety (e.g., the danger of fire). Someone with OCD will cope with this by some ritualistic behaviour such as going back to check that all the elements on the stove are turned off five or more times, after they have already left the house. Again, turning off your stove to avoid a fire is a good thing; what makes this a disorder is the excessive checking that is unnecessary and does not increase safety.

Two of the words psychologists use in describing how people respond to stressful events are appraisal and coping. Appraisal is how we understand an event. Are we optimistic or pessimistic? Do we take events personally or feel they are random? How you understand something will determine how it affects you and how well you will be able to cope with it. Noticing our appraisal reactions and then looking for evidence to support them (or not) is a first step in managing our anxious reactions.

So, if you find yourself feeling anxious, don't worry. If you can't stop feeling anxious and you find yourself reacting strongly to what should be minor problems, it will help to talk to someone who can help. For some issues a good friend or your spouse may provide all the help you need. Sometimes, you may need to talk to a professional therapist. He or she will help you to reframe your understanding of events, to put things in perspective, and to reduce the impact of traumatic events with a cutting edge therapy method such as EMDR or Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy.

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