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When anxiety becomes unbearable

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Anxiety Disorders affect approximately 40 million American adults every year. It is the "common cold" of mental disorders. Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) occurs when going through the day is filled with exaggerated worry when there is little to provoke it.

Certainly, on any given day, stressful situations happen that cause brief episodes of angst. But when anxiety becomes pervasive for 6 months or more, it is time to seek treatment.

People with GAD cannot seem to restructure faulty thinking. In his book "The Worry Cure," Robert Leahy discusses types of faulty thinking, or cognitive distortions that exacerbate anxious thinking. Some of the cognitive distortions he discusses are:

- * Mind reading - Assuming you know what others are thinking.
- * Fortune telling - Predicting a negative outcome to a situation.
- * Catastrophizing - Believing the worst will happen, and it will be unbearable.
- * Discounting the positives - Feeling the positives in your life are trivial.
- * Shoulds - Looking at things as they should be rather than focusing on how it really is.
- * Regret orientation - Focusing on what you could have done better rather than what can be done now.
- * Inability to disconfirm - Rejecting evidence that contradict your negative thoughts.

People with GAD have difficulty making it through the day. They can't relax, startle easily and

have trouble concentrating. There may be an interruption with sleep or appetite, trembling, light-headedness and irritability. GAD often is accompanied by depression or substance abuse.

Treatment of GAD usually is medication and psychotherapy. If substance abuse is involved, this must first be treated.

Cognitive behavioral therapy often is used in therapy. This involves taking the faulty thinking and reframing how situations are viewed. Patients are taught to see that, although anxiety is uncomfortable, it is not the end of the world.

Overcoming anxiety means tolerating the discomfort until more rational thinking occurs. Challenging faulty thinking can be difficult to achieve, especially if you're a "born worrier."

It is important to reorganize thinking, for example, by asking yourself how likely it is that what you are anxious about will actually occur. List the evidence that something bad is really going to happen. Learn to stop a worry from becoming a catastrophe. Think of how you would talk to a friend with a similar worry. And, finally, think of how you could cope if a bad outcome actually happens.

The key to anxiety management is getting off the slippery slope before faulty thinking impairs daily functioning. Restructuring your thoughts and challenging negative self-talk can help defeat your worries.

The opinions expressed solely are those of the writer. Christine Priesol is a licensed clinical social worker. She works for Lansing School district 158 and maintains a private practice in Munster. She can be reached at cpriesol@aol.com. Due to volume, she is unable to answer each letter individually.

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