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Anxiety Disorders: Phobias

Everyone feels anxious or uneasy from time to time. Your first day on a new job, planning for a long trip, going to the dentist....your palms sweat, you feel shaky, your heart pounds. Some anxiety helps to keep you focused on the job at hand. However, when your anxiety is so serious that it interferes with your work, leads you to avoid certain situations or keeps you from enjoying life, you may be suffering from a form of the most common type of mental disorder, an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are not just a case of "nerves." You can't overcome an anxiety disorder just through willpower, nor can the symptoms be ignored or wished away. These disorders cause you to feel anxious most of the time, making some everyday situations so uncomfortable that you may avoid them entirely. Or, you may experience occasional instances of anxiety that are so terrifying and intense that you may be immobilized with fear.

Although these conditions can be very frightening and disabling, they are also very treatable. It is important to recognize the symptoms and seek help.

Specifically, Phobias afflict as many as 12 percent of all Americans. They are the most common psychiatric illness in women and the second most common in men over age 25. Phobias are not all the same. There are three main groups, which include:

- **Specific (simple) phobias**, which are the most common and focus on specific objects,
- **Social phobia**, which causes extreme anxiety in social or public situations, and
- **Agoraphobia**, which is the fear of being alone in public places from which there is no easy escape.

Agoraphobia causes people to suffer anxiety about being in places or situations from which it might be difficult or embarrassing to escape--such as being in a room full of people or in an elevator. In some cases, panic attacks can become so debilitating that the person may develop agoraphobia because they fear another panic attack. In extreme cases, a person with agoraphobia may be afraid to leave their house.

Specific Or Simple Phobias produce intense fear of a particular object or situation that is, in fact, relatively safe. People who suffer from specific phobias are aware that their fear is irrational, but the thought of facing the object or situation often brings on a panic attack or severe anxiety.

Specific phobias strike more than 1 in 10 people. No one knows what causes them, though they seem to run in families and are slightly more prevalent in women. Specific phobias usually begin in adolescence or adulthood. They start suddenly and tend to be more persistent than childhood phobias; only about 20 percent of adult phobias vanish on their own. When children have specific phobias--for example, a fear of animals--those fears usually disappear over time, though they may continue into adulthood. No one knows why they persist in some people and disappear in others.

Examples of specific phobias include persistent fear of dogs, insects, or snakes; driving a car; heights; tunnels or bridges; thunderstorms; and/or flying.

Social Phobia can produce fear of being humiliated or embarrassed in front of other people. This problem may also be related to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem, and can drive a person to drop out of school, avoid making friends, and remain unemployed.

Although this disorder is sometimes thought to be shyness, it is not the same thing. Shy people do not experience extreme anxiety in social situations, nor do they necessarily avoid them. In contrast, people with social phobia can be at ease with people most of the time, except in particular situations. Often social phobia is accompanied by depression or substance abuse. People suffering from social phobia may:

- View small mistakes as more exaggerated than they really are
- Find blushing as painfully embarrassing
- Feel that all eyes are on them
- Fear speaking in public, dating, or talking with persons in authority
- Fear using public restrooms or eating out
- Fear talking on the phone or writing in front of others

There Is Hope

- No one should have to endure the terror of phobias or the unrelenting anticipatory anxiety that often accompanies them. Phobias can be overcome with proper treatment.
- A person suffering from a phobia is suffering from a diagnosable illness, and mental health professionals take this illness very seriously.
- A complete medical and psychiatric evaluation should be conducted by a licensed physician or psychologist to obtain an accurate diagnosis and ensure that the symptoms are not being caused by another condition.
- Lastly, it is crucial to comply with treatment, and to work closely with the therapist in order to achieve success.

Behavioral therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy are very effective in treating these disorders.

Behavioral therapy focuses on changing specific actions and uses different techniques to stop this behavior. One technique involves *diaphragmatic breathing*, which is a form of deep breathing. Another technique called *exposure therapy* gradually exposes the patient to the object or situation, which frightens him/her and helps the patient to develop coping skills.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches the persons new skills in order to react differently to the situations, which trigger the anxiety or panic attacks. Patients also learn to understand how their thinking patterns contribute to the symptoms and how to change their thinking to reduce or stop these symptoms.

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; community and professional mental health education and a newsletter for first-time parents available in both English and Spanish. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board and United Way of Central Ohio. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.