

Coping with your skin-related anxiety

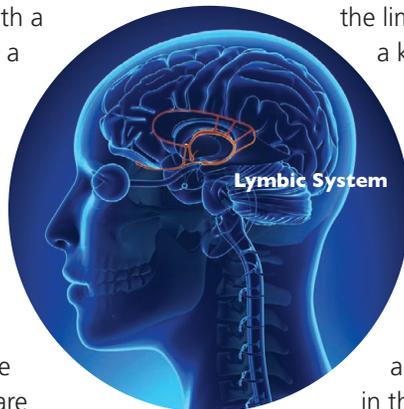
By Priya Dhir

Anxiety is a normal human emotion that everyone experiences from time to time. Anxiety turns into a disorder when its symptoms interfere with a person's ability to lead a normal lifestyle.

Anxiety activates the stress response in the body, otherwise known as the fight-or-flight response. This causes the body to produce stress hormones. These chemical messengers are secreted into the bloodstream and travel to different parts of the

body to bring about physiological, psychological and emotional changes. This response enhances the body's ability to deal with the stress, and either fight or flee from it.

Another part of the brain, the limbic system, is a key area for the regulation of emotions and anxiety. The amygdala is an almond-shaped structure that is part of the limbic system and it is key for anxiety. The cells in the amygdala are activated more readily in individuals with anxiety.



Your skin and the link to anxiety

Anxiety disorder can result from the emotional effects associated with skin disease. This is known as a secondary psychiatric disorder. About 30 per cent of individuals with a skin disease are thought to have secondary psychiatric disorders, such as anxiety disorder. Examples of skin diseases that are linked to anxiety disorder include vitiligo, psoriasis, rosacea, hidradenitis suppurativa, acne, alopecia and ichthyosis. Anxiety disorder can also be present in people suffering disfigurement or burns.

Symptoms of ANXIETY

Anxiety symptoms are symptoms of stress. Everyone is unique, so the type, number, intensity and frequency of symptoms will vary from person to person. One individual might have a single mild anxiety symptom, whereas another person might experience all of anxiety symptoms and to a greater severity and frequency. Whether mild or severe, individuals living with an anxiety disorder can have the following symptoms:

- > increased arousal
- > difficulty sleeping, restlessness or irritability
- > heart palpitations
- > nervous stomach
- > throat tightness
- > muscle weakness
- > sweating
- > light-headedness
- > headaches

When to seek professional help

People who have anxiety disorder as a consequence of skin disease often change their behaviour in order to avoid anxiety-provoking situations. This might include avoiding being intimate with a partner, missing work and declining social invitations. When these changes in behaviour and the physical symptoms of anxiety interfere with daily life, it is recommended that the individual seeks professional help.

Working with a therapist or a counsellor can be effective in overcoming anxiety. If not addressed, anxiety will return time and again.

Tools used to help with anxiety

The successful management of anxiety depends on educating the individual and their significant others about the interaction between the skin disease and the anxiety disorder. Therefore, once a skin disorder has been diagnosed, both dermatological and psychological aspects must be addressed. A multidisciplinary approach involving a family physician, psychiatrist, dermatologist and psychologist is essential.

1] Cognitive-behavioural therapy

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is the most widely used treatment for anxiety disorders. Cognitive therapy examines how negative thoughts contribute to anxiety, while behavioural therapy examines how the individual behaves and reacts in situations that trigger anxiety. The basic premise of CBT is changing the individual's perception of a situation, which then determines how that individual feels. A therapist will work with the individual to form realistic and calming statements that can help when faced with anxiety-causing situations.



2] Hypnosis

Hypnosis is sometimes used alongside CBT for those with anxiety disorders. It involves guiding the individual into a state of narrowed awareness, focused attention and heightened relaxation. A hypnotherapist uses different therapeutic techniques to help reduce anxiety and the pain associated with some dermatologic procedures.

3] Exercise, yoga and meditation

Research has shown that 30 minutes of exercise three to five times a week can be an effective method for reducing anxiety. Yoga can induce relaxation and thus reduce stress. Meditation produces a relaxing, stress-reducing state similar to that of hypnosis. It should be practiced regularly as a discipline to maintain effectiveness. Local community centres often offer a variety of fitness classes, in addition to yoga and meditation.

4] Medication

Medication can be used to decrease anxiety symptoms, but will not cure the underlying problem and is not a long-term solution. Anxiety medications also come with many side effects, including the risk of addiction. A family physician will help you to determine whether medication is a good choice for you. Many different types of medications are used in the treatment of anxiety disorder, including antidepressants, benzodiazepines and beta-blockers.

5 QUICK TIPS TO reduce anxiety

Plan your day. Having too much or too little to do can make you feel more anxious.

Keep a journal. Look for patterns and discuss these with a friend to help reduce stress.

Get involved. Volunteer in your community in order to create a support network.

Limit caffeine, alcohol and nicotine intake. They increase anxiety levels.

Practice positive self-talk. To increase emotional comfort, such as "I will get through this" or "I am feeling anxious now, but I have the power to make myself feel calm."

Conclusion

Anxiety disorder that results from an underlying skin disease can be treated—and the sooner the treatment is started, the better the outcome you can expect. Effective treatment requires honest communication with your healthcare professional. In addition to seeking treatment, it can also be helpful to join a support group to talk with other people with similar symptoms. Ask your healthcare provider about the resources available in your area. **CS**

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