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## Learning About Anxiety: You're Not Alone

*"I was so scared by the panic attacks that I wanted to crawl out of my skin. For no reason, I would suddenly feel terrified, the way you would if you were tied to the track with a train barreling down on you. But there was no train and no reason to be afraid. At first it was only the attacks that bothered me, but then I started feeling lousy most of the time. I didn't feel real, somehow, and it was hard to concentrate on anything. I felt so bad that it was hard to imagine that no one around me noticed anything different." —Marie, age 25.*

*"During the day, all I did was worry. I was under a lot of stress at work and at home, but my worries were way out of proportion to what was really happening. It was worse when I lay down to sleep at night. My heart would speed up and start pounding, and as I became more frightened, the pounding got worse. On several occasions, I nearly asked my wife to call an ambulance because I was sure that I might die any second. Eventually, I got to sleep. But in the morning I was exhausted." —Bill, age 36.*

The accounts you see here are from two real people who have what doctors call anxiety disorders. If you've had similar experiences, it's possible that you have a similar problem. Millions of Americans suffer from one of several common types of anxiety disorders. Bill and Marie are just two examples. But regardless of your symptoms, it's important to understand one simple thing: anxiety disorders can be effectively treated.

### What are Anxiety Disorders?

Everyone is afraid or worried from time to time. In fact, many of us are worried much of the time—about crime, money, jobs, kids, parents, illnesses—you name it. Without a certain amount of anxiety, we wouldn't get anything done. For example, if you weren't somewhat worried about keeping your job, you probably wouldn't work hard enough. Worry can be useful.

But at some point, some of us cross a line to an anxiety disorder. Medical professionals think that anxiety disorders are exaggerations of normal fears. Anxiety disorders may take several different forms. Some people worry constantly. They can't concentrate on anything because they can't stop thinking about a particular worry. But the worry is blown wildly out of proportion. For example, the person might be near tears worrying about her child's safety, even though she knows that the child is safe at home. Other people, like Bill, experience symptoms that make them think they're having a heart attack. Some, like Marie, have panic attacks.

But even though people with anxiety disorders often have different symptoms, they have one thing in common: their fears are way out of proportion to anything that's really happening in their lives. The worries take on a life of their own. As Marie said, there is no train barreling down. It just feels that way.

### What Causes Anxiety Disorders?

Scientists don't know why some people develop anxiety disorders. Genetics probably plays a role, and in fact, Bill and Marie are closely related. Although Bill was having a hard time at work and at home when his problem started, he had survived more difficult times without experiencing symptoms of an anxiety disorder or disturbing physical symptoms.

When Marie's problems developed, she was making decisions about breaking up with a boyfriend, moving away from her parents, and starting graduate school. But, like Bill, she'd been through rough times before without a problem. Bill and Marie were frustrated because they knew that their problems really weren't that serious. So where did all this anxiety come from?

People with anxiety disorders seem to have an overactive fear alarm. It doesn't mean a person has a weak character or a personality problem. Most people with anxiety disorders are well-adjusted, productive people. It's just that from time to time, parts of your brain start to play tricks on you. No one knows why this happens.

### **How Can I Get Over This?**

Anxiety disorders can be treated. This doesn't mean you'll never have trouble with anxiety again, but you can learn ways to control the symptoms. If necessary, your healthcare provider may be able to recommend some medication to help you until you can manage the symptoms on your own. The important thing to remember is that doctors and therapists have lots of experience treating anxiety disorders. With the right kind of help, you will get relief from your symptoms.

### **What Happened to Bill and Marie?**

Bill had several tests and found that his heart was fine. Once he knew that his symptoms were caused by anxiety—not a bad heart—he found a therapist who had been trained to help people with this kind of anxiety problem. He could have gotten some medication, but he decided to try some specially designed relaxation exercises. He spends time on these exercises every day, even when he feels well. And when his heart starts to race, the exercises help control the symptoms again quickly.

Marie was about to see a doctor for her symptoms when she came across a book about anxiety. This book helped her so much—mostly by reassuring her that she wasn't crazy—that she started to feel normal again very quickly. At the same time, the problems she was facing were gradually resolved. The panic attacks became less frequent and finally stopped. Since then, she's had some terrible upheavals—but no panic attacks or abnormal anxiety for more than 10 years. When she thinks panic might be coming on, she goes back to her books. She also knows that she can get help and, if necessary, medication if the problem returns.

Good luck. Remember, you're not alone. There is help for you.

If you need help, call the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 863-0395 or go to CAPS at 221 Ritenour.

### **Test Results and Advice Nurse**

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

### **Appointments**

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

**For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)**

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

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