Anxiety and Brain Injury

What is anxiety?
It is normal to feel anxious or worried from time to time. In fact it can be helpful in some situations. For example, think about how you might react if a lion approached you. You would probably respond with fear- your brain would send messages to the body to get ready to physically fight (fight response), or to run away from the situation (flight response). This experience of fear is part of helping us survive.

Anxiety is common in less threatening situations too. For example, it can be normal to feel anxious before a job interview or speaking in front of a group of people. This type of anxiety can sometimes be a good thing as it pumps people up ready to perform. Normal worry is relatively short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour.

Worry or anxiety is unhelpful when it relates to a number of things, occurs often, is extreme for the situation and stops you from doing things that need to be done. Anxiety can be experienced in different ways. Feelings of worry, fear or apprehension may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as a racing heart, butterflies in the stomach, rapid breathing, sweating or shaking, muscle tension.

How common are anxiety disorders?
Anxiety Disorders are very common. 1 in 4 people will experience an anxiety disorder at some stage of their life. After a brain injury, it is estimated that between 18% and 60% of people will experience an anxiety disorder. The most common anxiety disorders experienced after a brain injury are post traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.
What are the Symptoms of Anxiety Disorders

There are many types of anxiety disorders and each has different symptoms. This leaflet will discuss four common conditions: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder (PD), Social Anxiety, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). For information on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder see our other leaflet.

Generalised Anxiety

People with this disorder worry constantly about many different things that are often out of their control e.g. finances, health, work or personal relationships. The worry is uncontrollable and interferes with the ability to focus on activities, it can also be accompanied by feelings of tension, irritability, restlessness and difficulty sleeping.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is used to describe anxiety and fear arising from being in social situations, such as meeting new people, talking in front of people, being watched while doing something (eating, drinking, writing your name). This fear is accompanied by physical symptoms of anxiety and usually leads to avoidance of social situations.

Panic Disorder

Panic attacks consist of a frightening set of physical symptoms that may include:

- heart palpitations
- Sweating
- shakiness or trembling
- shortness of breath
- feelings of choking, chest pain, nausea, dizziness
- feelings of detachment or unreality
- fear of losing control
- fear of dying
- numbness or tingling, and hot or cold flashes

Panic attacks have a sudden onset and usually peak within 10 minutes. A panic attack may include anxiety about being in a situation where escape is difficult (such as being in a crowd or on a bus). A person who has panic disorder often lives in fear of having another panic attack, and may be afraid to be away from home or far from medical help.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) experience uncontrollable and unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviour or rituals (compulsions).

Typical obsessions include:

- fear of being contaminated by germs or of becoming ill
- fear of causing harm to oneself or others
- fear of doing something unacceptable

Typical compulsions include:

- excessive cleaning or washing
- putting things in a particular order
- repeatedly checking
- Hoarding
- mental acts such as silently repeating a prayer or counting

People with OCD are unable to stop thinking the obsessive thoughts and feel driven to perform the compulsive behaviors in order to control their anxiety and distress. OCD can be a debilitating disorder. Some patients feel compelled to perform rituals for hours at a time; this often interferes with their ability to fulfill social roles, such as work or parenting.
Anxiety After a Brain Injury

The causes of anxiety disorders are not fully understood. Some of the factors that contribute to anxiety include; genetics, chemical imbalances and structural changes in the brain. A brain injury may make someone more likely to experience an anxiety disorder due to the impact the injury has on the brain and the changes in thinking, behaviour and emotions that can occur. People who have low self-esteem and difficulty coping may also be more prone to anxiety disorders.

There can be some overlap between anxiety symptoms and changes after a brain injury, so it is important to speak to your GP or a mental health professional who understands brain injury if you think that you may have an anxiety disorder. Anxiety can impact on everyday tasks, relationships, wellbeing, and your recovery after a brain injury, so it is important to seek treatment.

How are Anxiety Disorders Treated?

Psychological therapy offers the most successful form of treatment for many anxiety disorders. Therapy typically includes techniques that help a person relax and manage the physical symptoms of anxiety, talking through and identify issues causing the anxiety, as well as strategies for facing fears and dealing with worrying thoughts. Because this approach targets the underlying problem, they offer hope of a cure rather than temporary symptom relief. Treatment may also involve taking medication for a period of time. However, psychological therapy is more effective than drugs in managing anxiety disorders in the long term. Speak to your GP if you would like to be referred to a psychologist.

See our ‘Relaxation after ABI’ fact sheet for some great relaxation tips and exercises.