

FEAR FACTORS

IF YOU SUFFER FROM ANXIETY, YOU'RE NOT ALONE. HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE STRATEGIES FOR RECLAIMING YOUR LIFE.

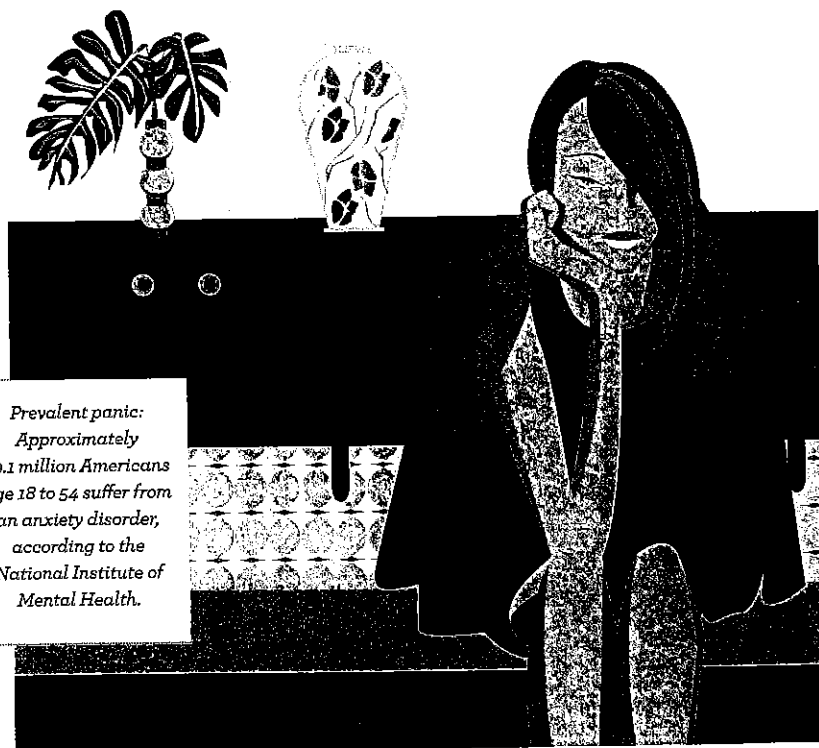
by Naomi Greenblatt, M.D.

Q I am a 39-year-old mother who has suffered from anxiety and panic attacks for the past 20 years. I conquered the panic attacks through talk therapy, but I still have anxiety. My physician prescribed me Lexapro. It has helped, but I still think about terrible things that can happen. Will I continue to suffer from anxiety? This definitely is not the type of life I want to live.

—Carolyn, Bergen County

A: Anxiety disorders and panic attacks can be caused by a combination of factors, including

biological and environmental causes. These may include a family history, an imbalance of neurotransmitters in the brain, substance abuse, certain medical conditions, and major life stresses. Symptoms of a panic attack include sudden, intense feelings of fear or nervousness as well as physical symptoms such as sweating, shortness of breath, a racing heart, and palpitations. Since your symptoms are still impacting your ability to function, you should be evaluated by a psychiatrist who can customize a



Prevalent panic: Approximately 19.1 million Americans age 18 to 54 suffer from an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

Anxious? Take Action!

Lifestyle changes can have a positive effect on anxiety management. Here are some tactics to try:

Avoid or limit caffeine. Coffee, tea, caffeinated sodas, and energy drinks act as stimulants and can increase symptoms of anxiety as well as trigger a panic attack.

Avoid alcohol. Many people with anxiety may be tempted to drink alcohol as it may initially decrease the anxiety. But, alcohol can actually increase your chances of having an anxiety attack and can trigger a panic attack.

Quit smoking. Nicotine is a stimulant and can lead to higher levels of anxiety.

Watch your diet. Eat foods high in magnesium, phosphorus, calcium, and potassium since these nutrients are depleted during times of stress. Also, try to decrease refined sugars and simple carbohydrates.

Get adequate sleep. Sleep deprivation can lead to an increase in anxiety. Good sleep is essential for maintaining health and keeping stress levels down.

Exercise. Working out releases endorphins, which are natural "feel good" hormones that can positively affect mood. Exercise has also been shown to decrease levels of stress, which can reduce the incidence of anxiety.

Learn to relax. Find a relaxation technique that works for you and use it to combat stress and decrease anxiety. Guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, breathing techniques, and yoga are great methods to try.

Talk with a friend. Discussing what is bothering you can help alleviate stress.

treatment plan for you. Your psychiatrist should order routine blood work because some medical conditions (such as thyroid abnormalities) can mimic feelings of panic. It is crucial to eliminate any inherent physical factors that may be contributing to your panic to best understand how to manage your attacks. Perhaps Lexapro — or the dosage you've been prescribed — might not be right for you.

Continue with the talk therapy. It's particularly useful in the treatment of anxiety.

❶ *I have recently developed a social phobia and cannot go out to public places. How can I overcome this fear?*

—Amy, Dumont

A: Social anxiety is a very treatable condition and can be overcome with proper therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be very effective for social anxiety. In this type of therapy, you may learn how to change your thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behavior to better tolerate an anxiety-provoking situation. It is based on the realization that it is your thoughts, not the environmental situation, that cause social anxiety. In individual therapy, you can learn to think differently about your anxiety. You can reprogram your mind to think positive thoughts about yourself and social situations. Participation in a social anxiety therapy group can also be helpful. Members can gradually work on problems that may cause them anxiety in the real world using various techniques, such as acting and role-playing.

For more severe cases, medication used in conjunction with cognitive behavioral therapy has been proven to be most effective. I believe in incorporating, when appropriate, medication with therapy as well as relaxation techniques, such as yoga and reflexology, so a person has the best chance at a full recovery. *

Psychiatrist Naomi Greenblatt is the founder of The Rocking Chair — A Women's Wellness Center in Englewood. For more information, visit therockingchair.org.