Understanding Anxiety

We all experience anxiety in our daily lives. It's a normal reaction when we face a stressful situation, feel threatened, or under pressure. Anxiety isn’t always a bad thing – it helps us stay alert & focussed, spurs us to action, and motivates us to identify & solve problems.

However, when the feelings are too intense, or go on for too long, anxiety interferes with relationships & activities, making our lives miserable. Did you know that about 1 in 10 of us will suffer with anxiety or phobia(s) at some point in our lives?

The following questions can help you determine whether or not you suffer from anxiety:

• Are you constantly tense, worried, irritable, or on edge?
• Trouble sleeping? Feel tired a lot?
• Does anxiety interfere with your performance at work, school, or at home?
• Bothered by fears that you know are irrational but can’t shake?
• Do you believe that something bad will happen if certain things aren’t done a certain way?
• Do you avoid everyday situations? Suffer paralyzing anxiety when meeting new people?
• Do you experience sudden, unexpected attacks of heart-pounding panic?
• Do you feel like danger and catastrophe are around every corner?

Types of anxiety disorders

Phobias: We all have fears about various things such as heights & spiders but, for most of us, they don’t really stop us from doing what we want to do. A fear becomes a phobia if your fear is persistent, excessive or unreasonable; you may make enormous efforts to avoid the feared situation or object which, in turn, interferes with your functioning or routine.

Social anxiety disorder: You may be excessively anxious in social or performance situations. You may worry that others will be critical of you or that you may do something really embarrassing. The distress may be so bad that you might struggle to go into shops or public places, refuse to eat/drink in front of others, or avoid social situations altogether.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD): You may be bothered by persistent, recurring thoughts, impulses, or images that may be inappropriate & distressing. The obsessions trigger anxiety which drives you to make efforts to suppress them, or neutralize them with some other thought or action. These compulsions might involve repetitive behaviours (e.g. washing, ordering) or mental acts (e.g. counting, praying) that are meant to prevent some feared event from occurring and/or to reduce distress.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): If you’ve experienced or witnessed a traumatic event (e.g. car crash, assault) you may continue to feel very upset when you think about what happened. For some, this distress continues long after the trauma, affecting one’s well-being, physical health & ability to function. You are not crazy or weak – PTSD is a common reaction to stressful events – but consider speaking with a professional to help your recovery. (Please see our PTSD leaflet for more information.)

Anxiety Attacks or panic attacks are brief episodes of intense anxiety where symptoms usually peak within ten minutes but rarely last more than a half hour. But the terror can be so severe that you feel as if you’re about to die or totally lose control. Symptoms of an anxiety attack include:

• Surge of overwhelming panic
• Irregular heartbeat or palpitations, chest pain
• Feeling like you’re going to pass out
• Fear of losing control or going crazy
• Hyperventilation, trouble breathing
• Choking sensation

The physical symptoms can be painful and/or frightening & you may worry that you have some serious physical illness. Get a medical check-up. Once your doctor has given you the ‘all clear’, consider speaking with a counsellor…..

Counselling can help you recognise the early signs of a panic attack & get better at identifying situations that typically trigger them. You will learn ways of coping with and reducing panic so it doesn’t disrupt your life.

The first step to managing anxiety is to consider your lifestyle:

• Do I make time each day for relaxation & fun?
• Am I okay at asking for help when I need it?
• Am I taking care of my body? Eating right? Getting enough sleep & exercise?
• How often do I feel overwhelmed with responsibilities?
• Do I feel confident saying ‘no’ when I have too much on?

Simple ways to reduce anxiety:

Exercise – it’s a natural stress buster & anxiety reliever. Research shows as little as 30 minutes of exercise 3 to 5 times a week can significantly reduce anxiety.

Minimize quick fixes - smoking, alcohol, sleeping aids may reduce anxiety in the short term but don’t help you solve the underlying issues.

Relaxation techniques – When practiced regularly, relaxation techniques can reduce anxiety & increase feelings of overall well-being.
Meditation made simple:

- Sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor, with your back supported, or lie on your bed.
- Close your eyes. Put your hand over your belly button.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose (you can count to 3), feeling your belly rise/expand. Exhale slowly, feeling your belly contract.
- As you breathe, just concentrate on the movement of your breath & your belly.
- Your mind will wander to worries, things you need to do etc. Just notice what distracted you & gently bring your focus back to your breath.

Progressive muscle relaxation: On each exhalation, relax the muscles in a specific part of your body. Start with the muscles in your face – relax your forehead, eyes & cheeks. Then relax your neck, shoulders, and so on. Work your way down your body to your back, legs & toes!

Visualisation: Where do you feel the tension in your body? Do you imagine the tension like a knotted rope? What does your anxiety feel like? Like a dark cloud hanging over you or a weight pressing on you?
- With each exhalation, picture that knot getting a little looser, or that weight getting lighter, or imagine your anxious thoughts float away. Or simply imagine a relaxing scene – a beach, a garden, your patio – and describe in as much detail as possible what you can see, feel, smell etc.

Psychological therapy provides an opportunity to think through some of the reasons why you might feel the way you do. It offers ways of managing symptoms, and their impact on your day-to-day functioning, through changes in your behaviour and the way you think about things.

We work by appointment so come in, call or email to make a time for yourself. **Don’t wait for the problem to go away** … come in and speak with a student counsellor.

SELF-HELP STUFF

Check out the self-assessment tools on our website. These screen for a variety of problems such as anxiety, alcohol abuse, eating disorders, and depression. See: [http://sta.uwi.edu/caps/](http://sta.uwi.edu/caps/)

Other useful websites:
- [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation.aspx)
  (follow links to anxiety, shyness & social phobia)

HOW TO CONTACT CAPS?

Call CAPS on 662 2002 ext 2491. Email: [counsellor@sta.uwi.edu](mailto:counsellor@sta.uwi.edu)
Or pop in and see us. We are located in the Health Service Unit (HSU), between Trinity Hall and the Learning Resources Centre (LRC).

OPENING HOURS

CAPS is available **throughout the year**, from 8:30am to 7pm during term-time. We close at 4:30pm during vacation.

This leaflet prepared by the Counselling & Psychological Services, UWI, St Augustine.