



Anxiety Disorders and Addiction

Millions of Americans suffer from anxiety disorders that lead to substance abuse. In too many cases, those who struggle with anxiety attempt to self-medicate with alcohol and other drugs and end up addicted.

There are numerous types of anxiety disorders, including: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic attacks, different kinds of phobias, social anxiety disorder, acute stress disorder, and general anxiety disorder.

All of these anxiety ailments are treatable, but very few people with these conditions get medical treatment. Instead, they attempt to deal with their angst by drinking alcohol, smoking, and abusing prescription drugs or street drugs. But too often substance abuse only worsens anxiety. For example, people who get drunk, stoned, or high may end up seriously embarrassing themselves—or even worse, being involved in an accident that injures an innocent person.

More than 40 million Americans suffer from some form of chronic anxiety, and sadly, they are almost three times as likely to develop a substance abuse disorder.

Fear, Anxiety, & Anxiety Disorders

There is a difference between fear, anxiety, and anxiety disorders. Fear is a normal and natural emotional response to an immediate threat. Anxiety is a response to some perceived *future* threat. Anxiety disorders are psychological disorders that create feelings of excessive

anxiety and fear for prolonged periods of time.

When an individual recognizes that a threat is present or perceives that threat to be imminent, he or she will experience anxiety or fear. But when the threat is gone, the feelings of fear and anxiety should dissipate. For people with anxiety disorders, the anxiety continues for far longer than normal, and the feelings of fear and anxiety are much more intense.

It is normal for human beings to periodically experience feelings of anxiousness, stress, and fear. These feelings are natural and can even be beneficial when they occur under the right circumstances. But those who suffer from anxiety disorders live in a constant state of worry and dread.

Drugs and alcohol are often used by people with anxiety disorders in an attempt to relieve the incessant worry and physical agitation, but substance abuse only makes the symptoms worse. Using alcohol and drugs results in a destructive cycle that can increase the risk of self-isolation and suicide ideation.

Physical Manifestations of Anxiety

Anxiety does not only cause damage to one's emotional state—the body is affected, too. The physical manifestations of anxiety can include: fatigue, sweating, rapid or shallow breathing, digestive problems, decreased appetite, tremors, jumpiness, dry mouth, and insomnia. Alcohol and drug abuse can worsen these physical symptoms and make it more difficult to function at work and in life.

When someone with an anxiety disorder becomes addicted and then tries to stop using drugs or alcohol, he or she will often experience intense effects of withdrawal that make the impact of his or her anxiety disorder even worse. The effects of withdrawal—such as a sense of dread, restlessness, shakiness, increased blood pressure, and delusional thinking—are identical to the symptoms of anxiety disorder.

Anxiety & Addiction in the Workplace

Many people experience stress and anxiety at work, and a certain amount of stress is normal at work and at home. But persistent and excessive anxiety can adversely affect an employee's ability to do his or her job, and when someone's anxiety interferes with the ability to function, that person might be suffering from an anxiety disorder. If the individual tries to deal with the problem by self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, the situation worsens—resulting in accidents, increased medical costs, increased absenteeism and tardiness, and a reduction in productivity. If the person does not get help, loss of the job may be inevitable.

Most employees do not feel comfortable talking about their stress with a supervisor, but it is important that the employer be made aware of any conditions that could negatively impact work performance. When a worker does speak to his or her manager about problems with anxiety, the employee will most often be referred to a counseling professional

or a stress management or relaxation class.

Co-Occurring Disorder Treatment

The combination of anxiety and substance abuse can be overwhelming. But anxiety and addiction can be treated. However, people with co-existing anxiety disorders and substance abuse problems need help from professionals who are trained in treating both conditions simultaneously. Dual-diagnosis treatment will be necessary in order for the person to get well.

Successful treatment must focus on the anxiety problem and the substance abuse issue together, and treatment for the addiction will depend on the substance to which the patient is addicted. If the drug being used is an opioid, prescription medications may be used to help achieve abstinence, but if the drug of choice is cocaine or cannabis, there are no such medications that will help. For these drugs, a combination of psychotherapy, counseling, and a 12-step program may be necessary.

Recovery from an anxiety disorder coupled with addiction can be a difficult challenge, but support and resources needed to overcome these disorders and lead a healthier, more satisfying life are available. Dual-diagnosis recovery programs that provide a full range of rehab services can be found by contacting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357).