

Stress vs. Anxiety: Understanding the Difference



Regardless of your background, socioeconomic status, education, or talents, you will inevitably experience stress as a normal part of life. However, when the stress turns into persistent anxiety, it is important to get extra help. So what is the difference between stress and anxiety? What can be done to alleviate the discomfort caused by these feelings? This fact sheet will outline the differences between normal day-to-day stress and persistent anxiety, specifically Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and how to deal with them both.

Stress

Stress is the body's reaction to a threatening situation, challenge, or demand in the present (ADAA, 2016b; Vorvick, 2016). It is especially common when circumstances require change (Mishkova, 2013). Stress can also occur when doing something new or exciting, even though these things are often seen as positives. Stress can be helpful to an extent, such as helping you to avoid danger or meet a deadline, although chronic stress (i.e., stress that does not go away) can cause problems. This is because when the body experiences stress, hormones are released that make the body more alert, the muscles more tense, and the pulse increased (Vorvick, 2016), and thus prepared to react fast to the threat (APA, n.d.). When the body stays like this for an extended period of time, it can become harmful to the body and lead to health problems (Vorvick, 2016).

Anxiety

Anxiety results from situations that cause nervousness, fear, or worry, especially about the future. We all feel anxiety from time to time, but when it becomes a daily occurrence that disrupts day-to-day functioning, it is

problematic (Mishkova, 2013). When worrying takes up much of one's day and the worrying is not proportionate to the actual severity of the stressor, it is classified as being excessive (Glasofer, 2017). There are several forms of anxiety disorders, including phobias, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and social anxiety. However, for the purposes of this fact sheet, the focus will be on generalized anxiety disorder (also referred to as GAD; Mishkova, 2013). According to the official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (more commonly referred to as the DSM-5; ADAA, 2016c; Glasofer, 2017), GAD is identified in adults as experiencing three or more of the following symptoms on the majority of days for at least 6 months, in addition to excessive worry on most days that is difficult to control:

- Restlessness
- Easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbance (sleeping too much or too little, sleep not restful)

In order to be diagnosed with GAD, these symptoms cannot be caused by any other condition or substance, and must interfere with daily life (Glasofer, 2017). Those who experience anxiety disorders have difficulty tolerating uncertainty and feel that their worrying helps to keep bad things from happening. This way of thinking is what makes it so difficult to let go of the worrying. Those with GAD tend to expect the worst from situations. This worry is different than normal stress because it is persistent regardless of the situation, whereas normal worry is situation-related. In the United States, in any given year, approximately 3.1% of the population will experience GAD, with women being twice as likely to be affected. Biological factors and stressful life experiences have been found to contribute. The impact of GAD can range from mild to severe, with some people being able to live very highly functioning lives, while others are immobilized by even the smallest of tasks (ADAA, 2016a).

Dealing with Stress and Anxiety

Stress can lead to anxiety and anxiety can lead to stress (Mishkova, 2013). Because of the relationship between stress and anxiety, it can be assumed that learning to better cope with either stress or anxiety would also help with the other. There are many selfhelp techniques for coping with the stresses and anxieties of day-to-day life, such as the following (APA, n.d.):

- **Get involved** – This is a great way to surround yourself with a good social support network. In addition, serving helps you to feel good about yourself.
- **Take care of yourself** – Get adequate sleep, eat healthy meals, and exercise regularly in order to give your body the best chance of functioning properly.
- **Focus on the positive** – Avoid negative self-talk and focus on what you can do, instead of what you cannot do. Think about how you have successfully coped with stressful situations in the past.
- **Participate in activities you enjoy** – Take time to step away from the stresses and worries of life to do something that you enjoy. Taking this kind of break will help you come back to the stressors with a clearer mind and renewed energy.
- **Apply relaxation techniques and meditation** – Learning how to calm a troubled mind can be very helpful. Even just a few minutes spent relaxing the mind and body can be effective.

While these self-help techniques can be very useful, if the stress or anxiety becomes overwhelming, it interferes with your responsibilities and relationships, and/or you have thoughts of suicide or self-harm, it is time to seek professional help (Vorvick, 2016). Therapy and medication, either alone or in combination, have been found to be effective at relieving persistent stress and anxiety (ADAA, 2016a).

Conclusion

There are myriad causes of stress and anxiety in the world today. What causes one person to feel stress and/or anxiety may not be the same for another person (Mishkova, 2013). However, regardless of the cause or the severity, there is help available. Try learning some self-help techniques and seek professional help, if needed, in order to bring more peace and happiness to your life today.

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