

DEAR DOCTOR

When Panic Hits You...

BY MARTINA ROGALL



Fear is a normal and necessary part of life like any other emotion. It is a reaction to threatening and uncontrollable situations and therefore a helpful warning sign. It is a natural and biologically determined reaction with symptoms like increased pulse and increased muscle contraction. It prepares the body for quick reactions (*e.g.* crossing the road if a fast car is approaching) and it increases attention and concentration (*e.g.* in an exam). However, if fear exceeds a certain level and emerges in rather safe situations, it can affect your well-being and quality of life. It can decrease your level of concentration and lead to irrational reactions, sleeping disorders and depression.

An anxiety disorder can have many different symptoms. The most common are:

- Getting a panic attack, with no warning, that causes an increased heart rhythm (tachycardia), dizziness, sweating, and/or tremors.
- Being scared in crowded places, *e.g.* elevators, subway trains, or shopping malls, which cause you to avoid these places.
- Avoiding situations or activities due to fear of getting a panic attack with an inability to get out fast enough.
- Restricting your daily life for fear of certain objects or situations, *e.g.* dogs or air travel.
- Worrying about daily situations so much it stops you from thinking and acting rationally.
- Experiencing agitation, sleeping problems, self-doubt, and/or concentration difficulties.
- Using alcohol or medications regularly to relax.

LIVING IN CHINA

The stress accompanying a move to China can provoke or intensify an anxiety disorder. Your move abroad brought with it many changes. Starting a new life in a new city demands a lot of personal adjustment. You left your familiar surroundings and culture, leaving friends and family behind, and you possibly gave up your work life. You probably have many questions and worries regarding infrastructure, medical facilities, and daily life amidst the Chinese culture. Living in Shanghai can be difficult and challenging. The crowds, traffic, noise and differences in culture are only a few of the factors that may be stressful.

Expatriate assignees often work hard and are under great pressure and competition. They have to adjust to their new working conditions, including adapting to working with their Chinese colleagues. Pressures and fear of failure can arise.

Most expatriate children didn't actively decide to move to China. However, they have to deal with their new

circumstances. They have to adapt to their new school, changing teachers and classmates, and the standard of performance can be much higher than their previous school. These factors can lead to withdrawal, refusal to cooperate or aggressive behaviour.

These and many other factors can lead to an increased level of stress and anxiety and promote the development of an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are among the most common psychological disorders. Research shows that between seven and fifteen percent of people in Western cultures suffer from an anxiety disorder. Research in Germany has shown that it takes an average of seven years until a patient with an anxiety disorder gets adequate treatment because the disorder isn't diagnosed correctly. If a patient does get adequate treatment, however, it will help quickly and efficiently in most cases.

There are different techniques, mostly cognitive-behavioural ones, to treat anxiety disorders. The most important are:

- Education about the development and treatment of the disorder
- Awareness of the situations that provoke anxiety
- Cognitive restructuring in order to get a more realistic idea about certain situations and body reactions
- Learning relaxation techniques (*e.g.* breathing techniques, muscle relaxation)
- Taking measures to prevent relapse using self-help techniques

Additionally, psychopharmacological treatment from a trained doctor can be useful to support psychotherapy. ✍

Martina Rogall is a Psychologist at Body & Soul Medical Clinics. Visit the website: www.bas-shanghai.com (email: huangpu@bodyandsoul.com.cn), or phone: Huangpu Clinic (5101-9262) or Minhang Clinic (6461-6550).