

## ■ Why do anxiety symptoms begin?

There are usually a combination of causes. Two of the important ones are:

- ① **The amount of stress you are under:** You may have a single major problem, or more likely a number of smaller problems which all add up to a large amount of stress. Stress can be measured to some extent by the amount of changes that have taken place in your life recently. Being physically tired, run down and having many changes or traumas makes you more vulnerable to anxiety.
- ② **The kind of person you are:** Some people have a more sensitive emotional nervous system. Their bodies' arousal response might be triggered more quickly and take a longer time to calm down. Some people have learned from their parents in their early experiences how to get anxious and how to worry.

## ■ What maintains anxiety?

Why does anxiety stay with you? What keeps it going? Basically, there seem to be two reasons:

- ① Because of the way you behave, especially because you *avoid* the situations you fear.
- ② Because of *beliefs* you have about the situation and its consequences.

Let us look at some examples:

'Lift phobic' people never go in a lift because they may believe it will fall to the bottom of the lift shaft; 'agoraphobics' never go out because they may believe they will collapse and die of a heart attack; some people may avoid meeting others because they believe that in a disagreement, they will lose their temper and hit people; some people obsessively check the locks on the doors and windows over and over before going to bed because they are certain that burglars will break in.

These examples make clear two things:

- ① Thoughts and beliefs can become distorted and exaggerated (and the person may realise that it is just that) about what will happen in the feared situation. Anticipating something bad is going to happen can create a vicious circle of anxiety.
- ② There is often direct avoidance of the feared situation. There may also be a network of 'safety behaviours', such as, always carrying a tranquillizer 'just in case', or always carrying a plastic bag in case of being sick, or always sitting close to the door. All these avoidance behaviours prevent you from truly realising that you can cope with anxiety and that the dangers are not real. Your irrational beliefs continue because they are never proved wrong.

## ■ Common myths about anxiety

As anxiety symptoms often occur without any obvious explanation, people often misinterpret them and think there is a more serious problem.

- ① **I'm going crazy:** There is no link between panic anxiety and more serious psychiatric illness.
- ② **I'm going to lose control:** There has never been a recorded case of anybody doing anything 'wild', or 'out of control' or against their wishes.
- ③ **I'm having a heart attack:** Although the major symptoms of heart disease include breathlessness and chest pain, the symptoms are generally related to effort and will go away quickly with rest.
- ④ **This anxiety will harm me:** Anxiety does not harm you physically, although it is unpleasant and uncomfortable.
- ⑤ **I'm going to faint:** Very unlikely as your heart rate goes up. You only faint if your heart rate and blood pressure drop.