**Anxiety Disorders**

***What are anxiety disorders?***

Unlike the relatively mild, brief anxiety caused by a stressful event (such as speaking in public or a first date), anxiety disorders last at least 6 months and can get worse if they are not treated. Anxiety disorders are different from the anxiety caused by a stressful event in that they can cause such distress that they interfere with a person’s ability to lead a normal life. For people with anxiety disorders, worry and fear are constant and overwhelming, and can be crippling.

***How common are anxiety disorders?***

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illnesses in the United States. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders affect about 40 million American adults, and approximately 5-10% of the US population has one or more phobias.

***Characteristics of anxiety disorders:***

* Excessive worry with an inability to control it
* Intense episodes of fear or panic
* Recurring nightmares
* Avoidance of social situations
* Difficulty concentrating
* Repeated unwanted thoughts (obsessions)
* Sleep disturbances- too much or too little sleep
* Upsetting, intrusive memories of a traumatic event
* Physical symptoms such as- nausea, stomach pain, rapid heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, shaking, dizziness, numbness, or difficulty breathing

***Some prominent Anxiety Disorders include:***

Panic Disorder: People with this disorder often have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning. Other symptoms of a panic attack include sweating, chest pain, palpitations (irregular heartbeats), and a feeling of choking, which may make the person feel like he or she is having a heart attack or “going crazy.”

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD): People with OCD are plagued by constant thoughts or fears that cause them to perform certain rituals or routines. The disturbing thoughts are called obsessions, and the rituals are called compulsions.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD is a condition that can develop following a traumatic and/or terrifying event. People with PTSD often have lasting and frightening thoughts and memories of the event and tend to be emotionally numb.

Social Anxiety Disorder: Social anxiety disorder involves overwhelming worry and self-consciousness about everyday social situations. The worry often centers on a fear of being judged by others, or behaving in a way that might cause embarrassment or lead to ridicule.

Specific Phobias: A specific phobia is an intense fear of a specific object or situation. This level of fear is usually inappropriate to the situation and may cause the person to avoid common, everyday situations.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: This disorder involves excessive unrealistic worry and tension, even if there is little or nothing to provoke the anxiety.

***Tips for Mentors:***

* If your mentee is starting to feel anxious, gently distract them away from things that make them feel that way.
* Do not dismiss their fears in anyway by saying things such as “there’s nothing to worry about” or “it’s all in your mind” or “you’re overreacting.”
* Stay calm with your mentee and do not pressure them into taking part in activities that make them anxious.
* Remember that their feelings are real.
* Be aware that anxiety disorders can translate to physical problems.
* Create a safe, quiet space for your mentee to get away and calm down if they need to.
* Some youth with anxiety disorders may be on medication. It is important to know that how your mentee acts while taking medication can differ from day to day or hour to hour.
* For some mentees, using positive affirmations can help defeat an anxiety attack before it begins. These are simple statements that change your mentee’s thought process from a negative one to a positive one. For instance, “You can overcome your fears because you are in control.”
* Discuss coping mechanisms and triggers. Understand triggers that disturb your mentee and try to create an environment that avoids such triggers.

***Resources:***

1. WebMD- Anxiety <http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/mental-health-anxiety-disorders>
2. What is Anxiety? A Guide to Anxiety [www.medicalnewstoday.com/info/**anxiety**/](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/info/anxiety/)
3. National Institute of Mental Health [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/**anxiety**-disorders/](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/)