

Normal Anxiety Versus Anxiety Disorders

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What is Anxiety?

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines anxiety as:

“An abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear, often marked by physiological signs (such as sweating, tension, and increased pulse), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.”

There is, however, such a thing as “normal” anxiety. Understanding the difference between normal and abnormal anxiety is an important clinical skill we clinicians must develop.

Anxiety: Normal Versus Disorder

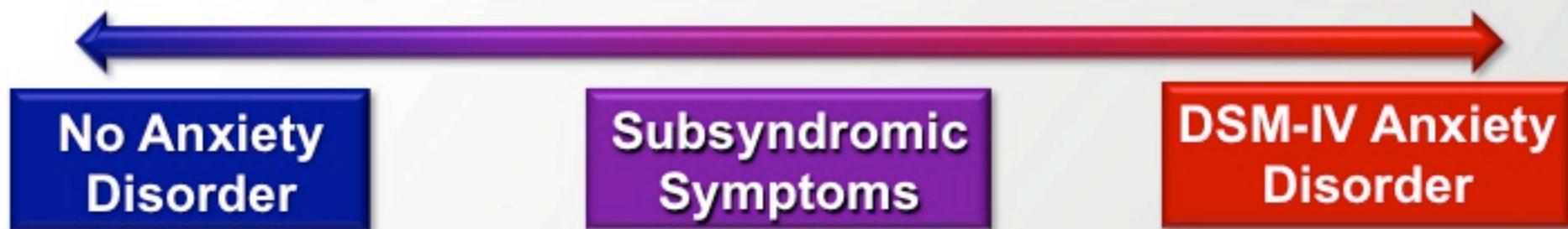
Normal Anxiety

- Situational
- Temporary/short duration
- None or minimal damage
- Often creates a “learning” or “growth” experience

Anxiety Disorder

- In excess of provoking situation (if any present)
- Multiple symptoms
- Typically a chronic, recurrent course
- Impairing in at least one life domain

Anxiety Disorders Exist on a Spectrum



- All of us have had occasional symptoms of anxiety
- An anxiety disorder exists when at least the following criteria are met:
 - Enough symptoms are present
 - They have been present for a certain length of time, depending on the disorder
 - They cause impairment (Note: subsyndromic symptoms, eg, people meeting some, but not all, of the above criteria are common in clinical practice)

Anxiety Disorder Facts

- Most common mental illness in the U.S., with 19 million adults affected
- Anxiety is highly treatable (up to 90% of cases), but only one third receive treatment
- People with an anxiety disorder are 3–5 times more likely to go to the doctor and 6 times more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric disorders than non-sufferers

Clinical Pearls

- Experiencing anxiety is part of being human
- Anxiety itself is not abnormal, nor is it a disorder
- However, the normal experience of anxiety can slip into becoming a disorder if the following are present:
 - Presence of certain symptoms on a frequent basis
 - Minimum duration (different for different disorders)
 - Demonstrated impairment and/or patient suffering
 - Not caused by a medical condition or a substance