

# Attack of the Nerves

by Kirsten Weir



## Butterflies in your stomach? Worries keeping you awake? Here's how to deal.

Kara C. is usually cool, calm, and collected. But like everyone, her nerves sometimes get the better of her. "In seventh grade, we had to do a play," says the 14-year-old from New York. "Sometimes I'd get nervous and start to forget my lines." Michigan teen Kevin P. has been through the same thing. "I had to do a speech in front of [the] class. It feels like a thousand beady eyes staring at you!" says Kevin, 15. "I couldn't concentrate enough to read my notes."

Have you ever felt as if you have butterflies fluttering in your stomach? That uneasy feeling is *anxiety*, and it happens to everyone. It is when you feel worried or uneasy. A little anxiety is a normal human reaction to stress. But sometimes anxiety can spin out of control. Luckily, you can learn to calm those feelings and move on.

### Internal Alarm

Anxiety is similar to fear. When you are facing danger, your brain gets ready to make a quick decision: fight or run away. That is called the fight-or-flight reaction. The brain tells the body to release *adrenaline*, a chemical that triggers certain changes in the body. Your heart beats faster. You breathe more quickly. Your muscles tense, and you start to sweat. You might feel a little dizzy or sick to your stomach.

There are good reasons for the body's fight-or-flight reaction, explains William Shryer, a social worker in Danville, Calif. Anxiety is like an internal alarm that helps you stay safe. Fear of heights can keep you from falling off a cliff. Feeling nervous before a test can inspire you to study. "Anxiety is a good thing," he says.

Still, you can have too much of a good thing. "Normal anxiety decreases when the danger is gone," Shryer says. But when worry sticks around, it can get in the way of life. About 13 of every 100 kids ages 9 to 17 have what are known as *anxiety disorders*. For those kids, Shryer says, anxiety "is like a haunting monster."

## In Control

Why are some people more anxious than others? Scientists aren't sure. Some kids might learn nervous behavior from anxious parents. Genetics and brain chemistry might also play a role.

Anxiety can affect your appetite and make it hard to concentrate. It can also keep you from getting a good night's sleep. Over time, constant stress from anxiety can damage your health, says Elizabeth Carll, a psychologist in Huntington, N.Y. Uncontrolled anxiety can lead to heart problems, stomach disorders, weight gain, and depression.

Luckily, there are ways to keep nervousness in check. Next time you feel anxious, try these stay-calm strategies.

**Think positive.** "More things go right than wrong, but we tend to remember the negative," Carll says. Focusing on good things can help keep nervous thoughts away.

**Take a deep breath.** Learn yoga or other stress-management tools, such as deep breathing or relaxation exercises. Turn to those techniques to calm yourself when you feel worry creeping in.

**Find a shoulder to lean on.** When you feel anxiety coming on, turn to a trusted friend or family member. Before tough tests or tryouts, try talking with friends or teammates.

**Move your muscles.** Exercise releases brain chemicals that can boost your mood and calm you down. "Exercise is great for an anxious person," Carll says.

**Plan ahead.** Being prepared can help. "If I procrastinate studying for a test, that ends up making me worry more, since I'm not prepared," says Kevin. Planning ahead works outside of school too. Kara was nervous about going to a birthday party where she would know only a few people. She made plans to have a friend introduce her to everyone right away. That way, she would get to meet everyone and wouldn't feel like an outsider. "They'll know who I am, and I'll know who they are," Kara says.

**Get your Z's.** Kids and teens need at least nine hours of sleep a night. Too little shut-eye can have an effect on brain function and emotions, which can make anxiety worse. "Sleep is so critical," Carll says.

With practice, you can learn to keep anxiety from taking over. But if worry is affecting your performance at school or in social situations, look to a trusted adult for some help. You may have an anxiety disorder that

can be treated with therapy or medication.

The good news, Carll shares, is that you can learn to control anxiety. With practice, she says, you can become better at dealing with anxiety-and even learn ways to keep yourself from getting overly stressed in the first place.

## Extreme Anxiety

Sometimes feelings of worry take over a person's life. When that happens, it is often because of an *anxiety disorder*. There are several kinds of anxiety disorders.

**Generalized anxiety disorder** causes extreme worry and dread for no obvious reason.

**Phobias** are intense fears of specific things, such as spiders (*arachnophobia*) and open spaces (*agoraphobia*). One of the most common anxiety disorders among teens is social phobia, which causes extreme anxiety in social situations.

**Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)** causes near-constant anxious thoughts, such as fear of germs. OCD sufferers try to relieve those thoughts with rituals such as frequent hand-washing.

**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a type of anxiety that develops after experiencing a terrifying event. Soldiers can return from war with PTSD, for instance.

**Panic disorder** causes sudden attacks of terror and fear of losing control. People having a panic attack may feel tingling in the arms, shortness of breath, and a racing heart.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Which of the following phrases was NOT used to describe anxiety?

- A. a similar feeling to fear
- B. a calm and relaxed mood
- C. like butterflies fluttering in your stomach
- D. something that happens to everyone

2. The author *lists* some anxiety disorders in the passage. Which of the following correctly matches the disorder with its description?

- A. Generalized anxiety disorder - causes near-constant anxious thoughts, such as fear of germs
- B. Panic disorder - an intense fear of specific things such as spiders
- C. Obsessive-compulsive disorder - causes sudden attacks of terror and fear of losing control
- D. Post-traumatic stress disorder - a type of anxiety that develops after experiencing a terrifying event

3. How might a person know if their anxiety was actually a disorder?

- A. Every time the person goes to a party, they feel uneasy.
- B. Some nights the person has trouble sleeping.
- C. None of the calming strategies seem to stop the anxiety.
- D. All the times that the person has to speak in public they get really nervous.

4. Read the following sentence and answer the question below:

"Generalized anxiety disorder causes extreme worry and dread for no obvious reason."

In the sentence the word **extreme** most nearly means

- A. a limited amount of something
- B. a normal amount of something
- C. a large amount of something
- D. a small amount of something

5. The primary purpose of this passage is to

- A. inform the reader about anxiety and ways to help it
- B. describe how the reader can get rid of all stress from their life
- C. help the reader diagnose their anxiety disorder
- D. show the reader that anxiety is actually good for them

A student had an anxiety disorder, \_\_\_\_\_ she spoke to her teacher and decided to get help with therapy or medication.

- E. yet
- F. although
- G. because
- H. so