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Overcoming Excessive Worry and Anxiety

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Job interviews, oral presentations, candidacy exams, first dates, meeting with a new advisor. All of these situations have one thing in common: for most of us, they all produce similar feelings of anxiety. Anxiety and worry are a normal part of life. Every graduate student can relate to having some degree of apprehension when facing some of the typical challenges of graduate life at Caltech. Not only is anxiety a common human emotion, but a moderate amount of anxiety can be helpful because it motivates us to prepare for exams, complete assignments, and can give us a sense of vitality and energy in our interactions. In short, if anxiety is mild, it invigorates us and helps us move along in our day to day lives and in seeking out new challenges.

Given that some anxiety is normal and even helpful, when should an individual become concerned about his or her level of anxiety? When persistent and unrealistic worry is a habitual response to life, or when a person knows it is interfering with his or her ability to function, there is reason to be concerned. Anxiety disorders are one of the most commonly reported psychological problems. Sometimes anxiety disorders arise as a response to being in an overly stressful situation for too long of a time; or as a response to an acute and severe stress or loss. At other times, a person feels excessive worry when in a very specific but commonplace situation such as a social situation or while public speaking.

The common experience across all kinds of anxiety disorders involves physiological symptoms such as heart pounding, chest tightness, sweating, trembling, muscle aches and tension, stomach or headache, dizziness, and insomnia. We feel like our senses are on full alert. Emotional signs such as nervousness, worry, fear, edginess and irritability are also common. Finally, nonproductive obsessing or ruminating about oneself or the feared situation is common, as is avoiding the feared situation. People with anxiety disorders falsely believe that if they face what they fear, they will fail, be embarrassed or humiliated, or be met with criticism or rejection. While they are not necessarily depressed, they usually do not feel strong and competent to deal effectively with things in their lives.

Interestingly, the person with an anxiety disorder usually knows the fear is irrational but cannot talk themselves out of it on their own. This insight with an accompanying inability to change the problem leaves the anxious person feeling helpless and frustrated. It is particularly frustrating for intelligent, rational, logical and otherwise highly functional people to cope with this disorder, because their intellectual skills are usually not enough to resolve the problem. In fact, highly rational or intellectually gifted people may spend even more time in nonproductive worry or rumination about the feared situation, in essence, trying to "think their way out of the problem." Although this strategy works for mild anxiety and worry, it is not successful in resolving more moderate and severe problems with anxiety.

So, what should you do if your anxiety seems to go beyond the normal degree, if you feel your worry is excessive and interfering with your ability to get things done in life?

There are many options for people with anxiety disorders. Some people find that reducing their stress or learning new ways to deal with stress can significantly reduce anxiety. We all know there are many ways of reducing stress and the Caltech Counseling Center web page and library has some good resources on this topic. We at the Counseling Center also offer a

group workshop on stress management during the fall and winter terms and are happy to talk with any student on an individual basis about ways to manage stress at any point in the year.

It is true that simply talking with a friend or colleague can also really help if you are feeling overly worried and isolated and alone. If you don't find this strategy to be enough, or if you don't have close friends available at this point in your life, talking about your anxiety and fears with a therapist can be quite helpful. Therapy can involve both understanding the underlying causes of your anxiety and doing more specific work with your therapist designed to increase one's awareness of and control over the thought patterns and physiological responses that are a part of the anxiety disorder. In some cases, medication in combination with therapy may be helpful. The important thing to remember is that anxiety disorders are treatable and that in most cases, symptoms can be substantially reduced or resolved with treatment. We encourage you to consider calling our office at X8331 if you want to discuss your own concerns with us or to check out our web page at www.counseling.caltech.edu and our library for more information about this common but treatable problem.

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