



## Anxiety in Former Professional Football Players

Anxiety is a normal human emotion that everyone experiences at times. Many people worry, feel anxious, or nervous, or worry about things. However, **anxiety disorders** involve symptoms that are so frequent or severe that they can interfere with a person's ability to lead a normal life.

### Symptoms of anxiety can include:

- Feeling afraid in general
- Being afraid of specific things like spiders, snakes, clowns, closed spaces, open spaces, or heights
- An inability to be still and calm
- Worrying too much
- Irritability
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Nausea
- Feeling like you have a lump in your throat or are choking
- Dry mouth
- Sudden sweating
- Numbness or tingling in the hands or feet
- Dizziness
- Muscle tension
- Trouble concentrating

**Everyone** experiences SOME of the symptoms described above some of the time. It is when symptoms of anxiety are so frequent and intense that they **cause significant problems in school, work, or relationships** that there is concern for a possible **anxiety disorder**.

There are several types of anxiety disorders:

- **Panic disorder** is when people experience the sudden onset of feelings of terror or panic with no warning. They may feel like they are dying or going crazy.
- **Social anxiety disorder** involves overwhelming worry and self-consciousness about interacting with other people.
- **Phobias** are unreasonable fears caused by specific objects or situations
- **Generalized anxiety** involves excessive worry and unrealistic fears, even when there is really nothing to worry about
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** can develop when someone has experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war, violent personal assault such as rape, or other life-threatening events. Symptoms can also develop in someone with only indirect exposure to a traumatic event.
- People with **Obsessive-Compulsive disorder** suffer from unwanted and intrusive thoughts that they can't seem to get out of their heads (obsessions), often compelling them to repeatedly perform ritualistic behaviors and routines (compulsions) to try and ease their

### What Causes Anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders are probably caused by a combination of factors, including genetics, changes in the brain in response to stress, personality type, and exposure to severe or prolonged traumatic experiences.

### **How common are Anxiety Disorders?**

Anxiety disorders are the **most common mental illness in the U.S.**, affecting 40 million adults in the United States age 18 and older (18% of U.S. population). Nearly half of people diagnosed with depression also suffer from anxiety disorders. Although symptoms of anxiety are common among retired football players, there have been no formal studies of anxiety disorders in this group.

### **How is an Anxiety Disorder diagnosed?**

Only a qualified health professional should diagnose an anxiety disorder. Diagnosing someone with an anxiety disorder requires taking a careful history and ruling out medical conditions that could cause similar symptoms.

### **Treatments for Anxiety Disorders**

Anxiety disorders are highly treatable, yet only about one-third of those suffering receive treatment. Many people with anxiety disorders seek medical attention for symptoms that mimic physical illnesses, or medical problems that are made worse by anxiety.

- There are many **Medications** used to treat anxiety disorders. Medications typically don't cure the disorder but can keep the symptoms manageable. Which medication is right for you depends on your overall health and the specific kind of anxiety you suffer from. Like any prescription medications, there can be a risk of overusing the medications used to treat anxiety.
- **Counseling** helps people with anxiety understand the factors that contribute to their symptoms and learn strategies for limiting the impact of their anxiety on their day-to-day functioning.
- There are many **cognitive-behavioral approaches** to curing phobias, including something called systematic desensitization that involves gradually improving someone's ability to tolerate the thing that makes them anxious or scared.
- **Biofeedback** and **relaxation training** can help people learn how to directly influence how their body responds to stress.
- **Mindfulness meditation** is a way to "train your brain" to slow down, focus, and respond to stressful life events without judging or overreacting. Like any skill, it requires practice, but it has been shown helpful in managing anxiety.
- **Exercise** is an important way for many people to manage their stress. Physical activities that require sustained attention, like yoga or tai chi, are also helpful.

### **Getting Help**

1) The first step toward getting help is to be evaluated by a doctor or other mental health professional. Your primary care physician may be able to recommend someone, or the Trust can help you find someone in your area.

2) **The Trust has made arrangements with Cigna to ensure that ALL retired professional football players, whether they have insurance or not, can have up to 6 counseling sessions free of charge.**

### **References and resources**

- <http://www.adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>
- <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>
- WebMD Adult ADHD: <http://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/guide/adhd-adults>

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental health disorders (4<sup>th</sup> Ed., text revision) Washington, DC