

MEMORY AND ANXIETY ... IS THERE A LINK?

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Many people with anxiety find that they're trapped inside their own head, "overthinking" and finding it difficult to live life to the fullest. So it may be a bit of a surprise to learn that memory problems are common in people who have anxiety.

Following is some information about memory and anxiety that you may find useful.

Anxiety

We often feel stressed or anxious when we're in a difficult situation, and for most of us these feelings subside after we've left the situation. However, anxiety that is constant, may be present for no particular reason, and that prevents us from doing things can have a big impact on how we cope in daily life.

What is anxiety?

Sometimes people experience anxiety all the time, yet for others it is only when confronted with a specific object or situation (such as flying, public speaking, or even fear of losing those we love).

Thoughts can include "What if ...", "Something bad will happen", "I'll die", "People will think I'm silly".

Feelings can include worry and being unable to stop worrying, irritability, restlessness, edginess, or even feeling detached from yourself and your surroundings.

Behaviours may involve avoiding people or situations, not engaging in enjoyable activities, finding it difficult to concentrate, or doing the same activity repeatedly/precisely/the same way to avoid something bad happening or to feel less anxious.

Physically you may have hot and cold flushes, sweaty palms, a racing heart, a tightening in your chest, muscle pain or headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath, nauseous, numbness, or disturbances in your appetite and sleep.

Anxiety and the brain

Anxiety can affect brain chemistry and hormones that could, in theory, lead to issues with memory.

Stress Hormones – Cortisol is released in large amounts during times of anxiety. Cortisol affects the brain, and leads to memory loss and problems with recall. Studies indicate that those with anxiety are likely to either struggle to create memories or forget them over time.

Distracted Thinking – When your mind is over-active, your brain is not often as focused on the new things you're trying to remember, and so memories are not fully created. Distracted thinking also makes it harder to focus on memories that you're trying to recall, as anxiety tends to consume

thoughts. In some ways your anxious thoughts are battling your normal memories for space in your mind; sometimes the normal memories will lose.

Secondary Issues

Anxiety can make it harder to sleep, and sleep deprivation has a known effect on memory and recall. Anxiety may also change priorities (in other words, making you remember bad things and forgetting good things), and anxiety may cause you to focus so much on the present or future that you rarely think about the past and the memory eventually fades away.

Short-term memory and concentration problems

You may have difficulty concentrating or it feels like your short-term memory isn't as good as it used to be. You may also notice that normal tasks seem hard to focus on, you are more forgetful, you forget things that you normally wouldn't, or you have difficulty forming thoughts or carrying on conversations. You may also start something and forget what you were doing soon after. You may also have difficulty remembering where you placed things, who you just called, what you just talked about, or what you were looking for or thinking about. You may also have difficulty remembering phone numbers, names, or things you recently did.

What can you do?

The experience of stress or anxiety often goes away by itself; or can be managed by having people you can talk to, using relaxation strategies, and sleeping, eating and exercising well.

It's okay to seek help

If you think you may have anxiety, and it's having a negative impact on your life, seeking professional assistance could be useful.

How can a psychologist help?

Psychologists use a range of effective techniques and therapies to assist people in resolving anxiety. Speak with your G.P. if you think you could benefit from seeing a psychologist.

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