

# When anxiety cripples the mind

by Dr. Kim Arbus

IT was the November of Michael's first year away at university when he called his mother from his dorm room. "Mom, I want to come home," he pleaded.

It was the third time that week that he had called. Michael had never before been away from home and he had increasingly been showing signs of anxiety. He had been coming home to visit every weekend since the start of school, missing out on all social events. He had not made many friends and had lost about 12 pounds since leaving for university.

While many students suffer from a degree of anxiety when they first move to living on campus, Michael's case was a little more extreme. He wasn't sleeping well and often went to see his doctor complaining of heart pains. At times he had gone to the hospital thinking that he was having a heart attack – or worse, thought he was going to die. In the ER, they would always check out his symptoms, but never found anything wrong. He was often sent home with a sedative medication to help him relax.

Michael's symptoms indicated that he was experiencing an anxiety disorder, which began interfering with his daily life and ability to function at school. Most people aren't aware of how intrusive anxiety can be on their lives.

The experience of anxiety can be normal at varying levels throughout our lives. Anxiety can be adaptive and helpful for us in certain situations when we should be wary or scared. For example, when walking in a dark alley we should experience some anxiety to help ensure our safety and help us be more cautious. However,

**Having a sense of anxiety is normal, even beneficial, in some situations. But when it becomes hard to control, it can stop people from living a normal life.**



when our worries start seeping into areas that they don't belong, or become too difficult to control, it can become a more serious problem. Anxiety can stop people from living normal lives and can interfere with many areas of functioning.

Anxiety can be physical, emotional and is always psychological. It is a bit like a fire alarm that has some faulty wiring. A fire alarm should only ring when there is a real fire; however with faulty wiring this alarm would sound even when there is no fire. It tells us that there is something we should be scared or worried about, even when clearly and logically there is nothing we need to be afraid of.

Unfortunately, the more often this fire alarm wrongly goes off, the more worried we get. The more worried we get, the more our anxiety grows. When we are anxious we sometimes come to see the world as a threatening and dangerous place. This assumption is often based on our guesses or perception of a situation, not actual facts.

Michael began to believe that no one wanted to be his friend. He wasn't invited to a few parties during the first few weeks of school and he felt

he would never make any friends. He believed that he was being judged for being the 'smart guy' and thought everyone would think he was not cool enough to be friends with. Ultimately, he stopped

going out to social events and began staying in his room as much as possible.

The assumptions he was making about the world and himself significantly impacted his ability to contain his anxiety and ultimately lowered his confidence to an unmanageable level. These types of misplaced beliefs can contribute to our experience of clinical anxiety.

Treatment of anxiety focuses on how to shift our assumptions and distorted thoughts about the things that are most anxiety provoking. Psychological research indicates that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) coupled with medication provides the greatest outcomes for people suffering from anxiety. Psychologists are well trained in CBT and typical treatment involves helping a person come to understand the connection between their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Once someone has learned strategies for managing their anxiety, a variety of other psychological interventions are also very effective.

If you suspect your child is experiencing anxiety, be sure to bring him/her to their

family doctor for a check-up and let your doctor know what is really going on. No matter how embarrassing a symptom may seem to you, the likelihood is that a doctor or mental health professional has heard it before. Anxiety can cause some very strange sensations for people. They can range from a racing heart, sweating and headache or stomach ache, to feeling extreme heat or cold, feelings of being unable to cope or breathe, tightness in your chest and hearing voices or seeing things that aren't really there.

Many young people also report repetitive thoughts or behaviours, including checking or touching the same thing. Worries about being judged socially or humiliated are also common in young people. These are just a few examples of the many possible symptoms of anxiety.

Ensuring that sufferers are getting proper nutrition, exercise and sleep is vital to recovery from anxiety. Learning good stress reduction techniques is important and making sure your child is involved socially is also good place to start.

Michael's symptoms were worsening by

the time he dropped out of school. He didn't understand why he was becoming so paranoid and began to worry that someone in his dorm room was stealing money from him. He was always hot and sweaty and complained of ringing in his ears, in addition to heart troubles that he was certain were the start of early heart disease.

For families who have a child like Michael, or an even younger child, there are some great resources available online including: [www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com), [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) or [www.anxietycanada.ca](http://www.anxietycanada.ca).

There are also a variety of organizations available for help. One that is doing some special work in the area of mental health is called the Youth Wellness Network, for youth of all ages, inspiring and empowering them to live happier and more positive lives. Programs are run at schools (high school, universities/colleges, elementary schools), youth organizations and anywhere else youth are. These programs are created to mitigate the most pressing issues that youth are facing in each setting. Groups are run in a fun, creative, entertaining and engaging way. Currently, work is being done with some high schools in Toronto and there are plans to expand. More information is available at their website, [www.youthwellnessnetwork.ca](http://www.youthwellnessnetwork.ca).

In Vaughan, there are a number of psychologists providing treatments for anxiety disorders (as well as other mental health issues). They can be located through the College of Psychologists of Ontario, under member search ([www.cpo.on.ca](http://www.cpo.on.ca)).

The good news about anxiety is that it is treatable. The first step is to recognize that you are experiencing anxiety. Next, is to talk to your doctor or call a psychologist to find out about treatment. With some help, Michael went back to university for his second year. He recovered quickly when he started coming to treatment and was able to get his life back on track and start making friends.

Michael graduated this year and will be starting a post-graduate program in business management. He is coping quite well with his anxiety. He is aware that he sometimes still has anxious thoughts, but now he knows how to fight them. **W**

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