

# Anxiety Causes: Do They Really Matter?

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If you are dealing with one of the anxiety disorders, you are likely to be concerned with the causes of your problem. You probably ask yourself, Why do I have panic attacks? Is it something hereditary, or is it the way I was brought up? What causes phobias to develop? Why am I afraid of something I know isn't dangerous? What causes obsessions and compulsions?

The symptoms of anxiety disorders often seem irrational and inexplicable: it is only natural to raise the question Why? But before considering in detail the various causes of anxiety disorders, there are two general points you should bear in mind. First, although learning about the causes of anxiety disorders can give you insight into how these problems develop, such knowledge is not necessary to overcome your particular difficulty. The various strategies for overcoming anxiety disorders presented in this workbook--such as relaxation, exercise, desensitization, changing self-talk and mistaken beliefs, or dealing with feelings--do not depend on a knowledge of underlying causes to be effective. However interesting the information in this chapter may be, it is not necessarily what "cures." Second, be wary of the notion that there is one primary cause, or type of cause, for any of the anxiety disorders. Whether you are dealing with panic attacks, social phobia, generalized anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorder, recognize that there is no one cause which, if removed, would eliminate the problem. Anxiety problems are brought about by a variety of causes operating on numerous different levels: heredity, biology, family background and upbringing, conditioning, recent stressors, your self-talk and personal belief system, your ability to express feelings, and so on. The range of chapters in this book indicates the many different levels on which you can understand the causes of and the means of recovering from anxiety disorders.

Some experts in the field of anxiety disorders propose "single-cause" theories. Such theories tend to greatly oversimplify anxiety disorders and are susceptible to one of two mistaken lines of reasoning: the *biological fallacy* and the *psychological fallacy*. The biological fallacy assumes that a particular type of anxiety disorder is caused *solely* by some biological or physiological imbalance in the brain or body. For example, there has recently been a tendency to reduce the causation of panic disorder, as well as obsessive-compulsive disorder, to a strictly biological level. Panic disorder is viewed as arising from a dysfunction in parts of the brain, such as the *amygdala* and the *locus coeruleus*. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is thought to be caused by a deficiency in a particular neurotransmitter substance in the brain called *serotonin*--or a dysregulation in the serotonin system of neurons in the brain. (A *neurotransmitter* is a chemical substance that allows nerve impulses to be transmitted from one nerve cell to another.)

It is helpful to know that there may be physiological dysfunctions involved in panic disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. This certainly has implications for treatment of these problems. But this does not mean that panic attacks and obsessive-compulsive disorder are physiological disturbances only. The question remains: *What caused the physiological disturbance itself?* Perhaps chronic stress due to psychological conflict causes the amygdala and locus coeruleus to

mal? function in panic disorder. Or perhaps chronically suppressed anger sets up a disturbance in brain serotonin levels that is a contributing cause of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Psychological conflicts and repressed anger may, in turn, have been caused by a person's upbringing. Because any particular physiological disturbance may have originally been set up by stress or other psychological factors, it is a fallacy to assume that anxiety disorders are solely (or even primarily) caused by physiological imbalances.

The psychological fallacy makes the same kind of mistake in the opposite direction. It assumes that, say, social phobia or generalized anxiety disorder is caused by having grown up with parents who neglected, abandoned, or abused you, resulting in a deep-seated sense of insecurity or shame that causes your current phobic avoidance and anxiety as an adult. While it may be true that your family background *contributed* in an important way to your current problems, is it reasonable to assume that this is the *only* cause? Again, not really. To do so overlooks the possible contributions of hereditary and biological factors. After all, not all children who grow up in dysfunctional families develop anxiety disorders. It is more plausible to assume that your problem is a result of *both* 1) a hereditary predisposition toward anxiety (and possibly phobia) *and* 2) early childhood conditions that fostered a sense of shame and/or insecurity.

In sum, the idea that your particular difficulties are *just* a physiological disturbance or *just* a psychological disturbance neglects the fact that nature and nurture are interactive. Biological disturbances may be "set up" by stress or psychological factors; psychological problems, in turn, may be influenced by inborn biological disturbances. There is simply no way to say which came first or which is the so-called ultimate cause. By the same token, a comprehensive approach to recovery from panic, phobias, or? anxiety cannot restrict itself to treating physiological or psychological causes in isolation. A variety of strategies dealing with several different levels, including biological, behavioral, emotional, mental, interpersonal, and even spiritual factors, is necessary for a full and lasting recovery. This multidimensional approach to recovery is discussed in the next chapter and assumed throughout this book.

The causes of anxiety disorders vary not only according to the level at which they occur but also according to the time period over which they operate. Some are *predisposing causes*, which set you up from birth or childhood to develop panic or anxiety later on. Some are *recent* or *short-term* causes--circumstances that *trigger* the onset of, say, panic attacks or agoraphobia. Others are *maintaining* causes--factors in your current lifestyle, attitudes, and behavior that serve to keep anxiety disorders going once they have developed. The remainder of this chapter examines each of these types of causes in more detail. A section on biological causes is included to acquaint you with some of the better-known hypotheses about the role of the brain in causing panic attacks and anxiety.

An outline of the causes of anxiety disorders follows.

## Causes of Anxiety Disorders

### LONG-TERM, PREDISPOSING CAUSES

Heredity

Childhood Circumstances

Your Parents Communicate an Overly Cautious View of the World

Your Parents Are Overly Critical and Set Excessively High Standards

Emotional Insecurity and Dependence Your Parents Suppress Your Expression of Feelings and Self-Assertiveness

Cumulative Stress over Time

### BIOLOGICAL CAUSES

The physiology of Panic

Panic Attacks

Generalized Anxiety

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Medical Conditions That Can Cause Panic Attacks or Anxiety

### SHORT-TERM, TRIGGERING CAUSES

Stressors That Precipitate Panic Attacks Significant Personal Loss Significant Life Change

Stimulants and Recreational Drugs

Conditioning and the Origin of Phobias

Trauma, Simple Phobias, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

### MAINTAINING CAUSES

Avoidance of Phobic Situations

Anxious Self-Talk

Mistaken Beliefs

Withheld Feelings

Lack of Assertiveness

Lack of Self-Nurturing Skills

Muscle Tension

Stimulants and Other Dietary Factors

High-Stress Lifestyle

Lack of Meaning or Sense of Purpose