

Psychoeducation for dealing with anxiety and anguish

Everyone occasionally feels anxiety and anguish – doing so is part of life. It can be deeply unpleasant, but it's not dangerous. And there are things you can do yourself to manage the difficult emotion. You can also be given help to manage your anxiety and anguish, if you feel that they affect you a lot and prevent you from doing things you would like to do.

What is anguish?

Sometimes the word "anguish", or "angst" (*ångest* in Swedish), is used when something feels difficult, nerve-wracking, or even boring. This can make it difficult to know what anguish actually is. Anxiety and anguish are fundamentally the same thing, but anguish is stronger than ordinary anxiety, and can be felt physically. Just like fear, anguish is triggered by our perception of a threat of some kind. This can be a situation, a place or a person, but thoughts and emotions can also seem scary or threatening and therefore trigger anxiety and anguish.

Anguish is unpleasant and can be frightening. The feelings can be so strong that you think you're going mad or that you're going to faint or even die. But anguish won't drive you mad, make you faint, or kill you. **Anguish is not dangerous.** Anxiety and anguish can be felt in different ways:

- Some anguish can come on suddenly, without you understanding why, and be felt physically. For example, you might feel a strong pressure across your chest, have difficulty breathing, or notice how your heart is beating fast or hard. You may also feel dizzy and weak, or become dry-mouthed. These can be very unpleasant sensations, but they usually pass quite quickly.
- Anguish can also appear as an anxiety you feel almost constantly.
- You may become tense, feel bodily pain, feel restless, anxious, irritated or sad if you frequently worry about many different things. You may also experience difficulties concentrating, relaxing, and sleeping.
- Feeling discomfort in certain specific situations can also be a form of anguish. For example, when you're going to speak to someone you don't know, or speak in front of a group of people. Or when you're going to use a lift, have an injection, or be away from someone who is important to you.

Why do we suffer from anguish?

Some people are more susceptible to anguish than others, which may be due to an innate vulnerability, conditions while growing up, or earlier experiences. If you become stressed a lot, demand too much of yourself, or worry a great deal, you may also experience more anguish. Sometimes a certain situation can cause anguish because it reminds you of an earlier, very difficult experience. Dejectedness, eating disorders, obsessions or other

conditions that make life difficult for you can produce anguish. You can also feel anguish without knowing why.

What can you do if you feel anguish?

- Try to continue doing things that are important to you, despite your anguish. Avoiding things you're scared of can make your anguish worse.
- Taking deep, regular breaths helps your body relax, reducing the anguish. Try to take a few breaths that go right down to your abdomen, and try to make the exhalation as long as the inhalation.
- Do relaxation exercises or listen to music that makes you feel calm.
- Go outside, take a walk and breathe fresh air in nature for a while.
- Exercise. When you suffer from anguish your body has excess energy, and getting rid of some of it will make you feel better. It helps the body relax.

What can you do as a family member or close friend?

Encourage your child to do the things they're scared of or anxious about, despite the anguish. It's a good idea help your child prepare for what they find difficult, but try not to demand too much of them in terms of what they should be able to deal with.

As the parent of an anxious or anguished child it's fairly natural for you occasionally to become frustrated or impatient. Still, you should know that scolding a child who is already anxious or anguished doesn't help.

It may be a good idea to speak to someone if you begin to find it hard to cope with everyday life.

Are there treatments?

If feelings of anguish have a significant effect on your life, help is available for you. Most people benefit from a treatment for their anxiety/anguish. The treatment includes learning more about what anxiety and anguish are. You then define a goal to try to achieve, and formulate small challenges for yourself which gradually become more difficult, in order to challenge the things you're afraid of at an appropriate pace. Your care worker will guide and instruct you, and you have to practise at home between your treatment sessions, sometimes with the help of your parents or some other adult who is close to you. It can also be helpful to learn various strategies for managing your own thoughts.

Sources and reading suggestions:

- 1177.se
- UMO.se