

## ON ANXIETY

NERVOUSNESS, WORRY, FEAR, ANXIETY, are all very commonly reported conditions. Very often we are not able to identify these emotional states and stare helplessly telling ourselves, "something" is happening. Quite a few of us may have already been on doctor-shopping-spree and would have been focusing upon the physical manifestations of anxiety, only to go through a series of diagnostic procedures that result in the conclusion that it is all in their "head". Our helplessness is understandable. Anxiety is known to be contagious.

Over the years, when we confront that we are anxious, "do something!" look, one of the things to do is...nothing...! Often, when one gets mobilised into doing something and suggesting ways to free the other of their distress, one is actually tacitly colluding with the other's often irrational fears. More often than not, our attempts can fall flat remaining paralysed by fear. Our suggestions are often met with various qualifiers and "ifs" and "yes, buts". This is because we come in with very low sense of personal agency. Sometimes, they may know what is to be done, but may find themselves unable to move in that direction. Also, they may just want to feel secure in the feeling that someone is in there with them, to help them make sense of mind-boggling distress. It may be a good idea to acknowledge and validate the people's distress and help them identify the feelings of fear arising from perceived threat.

RAVI, a 50-year-old high ranking Government official, almost suddenly found himself breathless with anxiety one day, eight months ago. He was driving back from work. Thereafter, he found himself sweating and choking over food and suffering from a sense of heaviness in his chest. He went through a series of tests and investigations and also various forms of treatment. Then he was referred to a clinical psychologist. Gradually therapy progressed and the psychologist could make some sense of his anxiety attacks as he talked about the impending sale of the family house; the disputes with his brothers; the sense that the family bonds are destroyed; the mourning for the loss of his father who had forsaken the family; and the anger arising from attachment with his mother who had chosen to ally with his brother. They found place for his grief over separation and his unfulfilled longings, and his anxiety attacks stopped almost automatically.

SAHIL, an 18-year-old boy, found himself unable to write his class 11 examination papers. He had been having fits during which his mind would blank out when he had to perform during examinations. After his second session with the psychologist he disclosed that his father had abused him physically and had forced him to opt for Commerce as his main subject while he himself had wanted to join a course in Finance. He felt a great deal of anger that he could not express.

SIMI, a 15-year-old girl, referred herself from a school. She reported that she was very anxious that she would not be able to study and do well in her examinations. The psychologist explored her beliefs and assumptions, upon

which her fears were based, she disclosed that she was afraid that she would be punished for her bad deeds. She took time in explaining what she meant by that. She had meant being compulsively drawn to older men and soliciting sex, at times on road. She also disclosed that she had occasionally bunked school to seek sex. The first time she had sex was at the age of five when a neighbour had sweet-talked her into it. Obviously, the anxiety she experienced was an outcome of the trauma of sexual abuse.

I have mentioned these cases to emphasise that anxiety has to be observed, studied and understood further. Thus, anxiety is a blanket term that may be used to refer to distress of various kinds. It may also be a good idea if people identify the feelings of fear arising from perceived threat. Living organisms respond to threat to survival through "flight, fight or by freezing." Therefore, behavioural expressions of anxiety in humans can be as diverse as timidity, shyness, avoidance, guilt and also frequent fits of uncontrolled anger. It may take people's time to even locate their anxiety. Diagnostic evaluations are needed to determine the course of action.

**For any further queries, please feel free to mail in to  
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