



HELPING A FAMILY MEMBER WITH AN ANXIETY DISORDER

Effect on the Family

Anxiety disorders can be as disruptive to family life as any other chronic illness. Many normal family activities may become difficult or impossible. There may be economic loss, additional stress, even resentment directed toward the individual with the disorder. Anxiety disorders can exact a heavy emotional toll on all member of the family circle, but they do not have to.

Family Participation in Therapy

Although ultimate responsibility lies with the patient, family members can help by taking part in the treatment program. Mental health professionals are increasingly recommending treatment programs that include family members, although the nature of the assistance varies depending on the disorder and the relationship with the patient. In addition, the more severe the disorder, the more likely it will be that family and/or marital issues will need to be addressed in the therapy program.

Why Participate?

Involving family members lessens the chance that they will feel neglected or harbor suspicions that they are being blamed for the problem. By promoting understanding, bringing family members into the treatment process also reduced the chance that the relative will think the patient's behavior is a bid for attention.

How to Participate

Family members can participate by offering support and encouragement, creating an environment that promotes healing and by accompanying the patient into anxiety-producing situations. Family members can plan a very important role by assisting the patient with "homework" that has been agreed upon in consultation with the therapist. Two types of at-home assignment involve exposure therapy and "behavior contracts."

Exposure therapy works by gradually bringing patients into contact with a feared object or situation in order to teach them that they can face their anxieties without harm. Family members can supplement the exposure sessions involving the therapist by accompanying the patient into feared circumstances on other occasions.

Behavior contract can be adopted for patients with Obsession Compulsive Disorder who often respond to anxiety by performing rituals or routines. The contracts limit how often the patient may indulge in ritual behavior. For example, an OCD patient who responds to anxiety by washing his hands would - according to a prearranged plan - be discouraged by family members from repeatedly performing the ritual.

Family Support

One of the most important things family members can do, however, is to be supportive of the patient. There are many ways in which to provide support:

- Learn as much as possible about the disorder.
- Avoid blaming the patient or yourself.
- Try to maintain a normal routine, but be flexible.
- Recognize and praise accomplishments.
- Offer encouragement.
- Modify expectations during stressful periods.
- Measure program on the basis of individual improvement, not against an absolute standard.

Working through the changes leading to recovery will require patience and understanding from all members of the family, but they should ultimately lead to more stable and therefore, more satisfactory, lives for all.