Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness or brain disease among Americans today. As indicated by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), in the United States, approximately 40 million adults and 7 percent of children ages 3-17 live with anxiety disorders. Common symptoms of anxiety disorder include feeling nervous, feeling helpless, a sense of impending panic, danger or doom, increased heart rate, hyperventilation, sweating, trembling, trouble concentrating, trouble sleeping, and having gastrointestinal problems.

With the prevalence of these types of disorders, it’s important for employers to understand what they are, how they affect individuals and how individuals living with anxiety disorders can get help. These disorders can affect anyone, and you or someone at your company could very well be living with one (or multiple).

Feeling anxious is a normal, healthy human response to stressful circumstances. Living in our world today includes many stressful circumstances that have been compounded by the pandemic and physical isolation. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines anxious as “Having or showing anxiety; uneasy in mind; apprehensive; worried.” Webster’s New World Dictionary defines anxiety as a “State of being uneasy, apprehensive or worried about what may happen; concern about a possible future event.”

One might reasonably question, if feeling anxious is normal, how do we identify an anxiety disorder? Anxiety can become “an abnormal state...characterized by a feeling of being powerless and unable to cope with threatening events, typically imaginary, as shown by sweating, trembling, etc.” When feelings of intense fear and distress become overwhelming and prevent us from doing normal activities, an anxiety disorder may be the cause. They involve more than a temporary worry or fear, the feelings are intense and the fear is out of proportion to the actual danger.

Here’s an example. During my last commercial airline flight on March 12, I was anxious about my health and safety since the pandemic was beginning to be present in the United States. While I was anxious, I was still able to travel home. My anxiousness did not prevent me from taking an action. Someone living with an anxiety disorder may not have been able to bring themselves to travel home.

Now that we have an idea of how to spot anxiety disorders, let’s go into more detail on what causes them and how they affect people. The two main causes of anxiety disorders are genetics and environmental factors. Studies indicate that anxiety disorders tend to “run in families.” A stressful event such as abuse, violence, or prolonged illness can also lead to the presence of an anxiety disorder. People living with an anxiety disorder often also live with depression.
Different sources identify as many as 10 anxiety disorders, but four are the most common:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**: The individual worries extensively about personal health, work, social interactions and everyday routine life circumstances.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder**: The individual experiences intense fear of social interaction.
- **Panic Disorder**: The individual experiences sudden periods of intense fear that come on quickly and reach their peak in minutes.
- **Phobias**: The individual experiences intense fear of specific objects or situations. Examples include fear of flying, heights, etc.

As with most illnesses, anxiety disorders are treatable. Unfortunately, the Anxiety and Depression Association of America indicates that less than 37 percent of individuals living with anxiety disorders receive medical care for their illness. Treatment typically includes psychotherapy or “talk therapy,” cognitive behavioral therapy and use of medications.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is one type of psychotherapy that assists the individual in developing coping skills to manage the situation and anxiety symptoms. Behaviorial therapy includes recommendations for lifestyle changes like regular exercise, using relaxation techniques, eating healthy and maintaining regular sleep patterns. Commonly prescribed medications for anxiety disorders include benzodiazepines, buspirone, anti-depressants and beta-blockers.

I challenge all employers to ask the following questions. Are any of your employees exhibiting symptoms of untreated anxiety disorders? Are you willing to provide the assistance they need on a prolonged basis? Does your company provide a culture that allows employees to get the help they need for illnesses of the brain? We as an industry need to continue shifting our culture until every company answers the last two questions with a “yes.”

To learn more about anxiety disorders, I recommend reading Embracing the Fear by Judy Bemis. Resources for this blog included the following: Anxiety and Depression Association of America (www.ada.org), Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org), National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org), National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.gov), and United States Department of Health & Human Services (www.hhs.gov).

**About the Author - Bob Swanson**

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.