Therapy can help ease symptoms of anxiety disorder

February 15, 2010
Evansville Courier and Press

Have you ever been at Wal-Mart dealing with the Saturday afternoon crowd and found yourself suddenly nervous and feeling like you had to leave for reasons you couldn't explain?

Do you avoid social outings because of fear that others will judge you negatively?

Do you still suffer from the effects of a trauma you endured years ago?

If so, you may have an anxiety disorder. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) approximately 40 million American adults ages 18 and older (about 18 percent of people in this age group) suffer from anxiety disorders such as panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and various phobias. Most people with one anxiety disorder also have another.

So how do you know what is "normal" anxiety and what qualifies as a disorder? We all get anxious from time to time in various situations, whether we are taking an important test, calling to ask someone out on a date for the first time or giving a big presentation at work.

A certain amount of anxiety in these situations is expected and natural. What turns normal anxiety into an anxiety disorder is the way it affects your level of functioning. If you fail every test you take (or avoid class altogether), never date or call in to work because you want to avoid others, this would definitely qualify as an interference in functioning.

If any of this sounds familiar, the next question is: What do I do about it?

It is common with anxiety disorders for most people to go at it alone and try to adapt. At Southwestern, many of the individuals I see who are agoraphobic find it difficult to be around crowds because of a past trauma or panic symptoms. As a coping mechanism, they may go to a 24-hour grocery store late in the evening or early morning hours when fewer people are there or only go when someone else is with them "just in case" an anxiety attack should strike.

When people with anxiety are ready to seek help, it is common for them to first turn to their family doctor, who may prescribe medication and/or refer them to mental health services.

Most individuals come in when they no longer are able to cope with anxiety on their own. Usually functioning has been interrupted in a severe enough way that the individual feels he has no other choice but to turn to a mental health professional.

The widely accepted treatment for anxiety is a form of therapy called cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). A therapist works with the patient to identify core beliefs and thought patterns that perpetuate anxiety (cognitions) and to give him a variety of "homework" assignments, such as practicing relaxation/meditation skills or exposure work if he has a phobia (the "behavioral" part). Exposure work most often is the difficult part because the individual is then forced to experience the anxiety he has worked so hard to avoid. However, with time, therapy and dedication to getting better, symptoms can improve.

This column was written by Mark B. Luzader outpatient therapist for Southwestern Behavioral Healthcare, Inc. Contact the organization at (812) 436.4221 or comments@southwestern.org.