

Anxiety That Won't Go Away

Dear Dr. K.,

I have had the sudden onset of anxious feeling for the last several months. My doctor says they're 'just nerves'. The medicine he gave doesn't help. What's up?

M.A.

Dear M.A.

I shall assume that we are eliminating any new stress in your life like a job loss, financial issues, divorce or loss of a loved one that could certainly cause your new anxiety. You should know that there are several medical problems that can mimic anxious feelings. One is hyperthyroid disease which speeds up your metabolism which can make you feel more anxious and 'hyper', overheated and generally running at 90 miles an hour. Pheochromocytoma is another medical problem. This is a benign tumor on your adrenal gland that makes adrenalin. It can cause you to have high blood pressure and periods of feeling very stressed.

People who have hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) have daily bouts of feeling dizzy, anxious and out of sorts. Of course there are some obvious things like taking in too much caffeine in huge cups of coffee, energizing drinks that have large amounts of caffeine or drinking many caffeinated sodas. Some medications also can be too stimulating and make you feel anxious. Asthma medications, for example, contain theophyllin that is like caffeine and is a stimulant. Sudafed, which is used for colds, is also a stimulant. Some people are sensitive to herbal concoctions or are taking mixtures of herbs that may have a stimulant included in the mix.

Most of the time, people with anxiety have had it for many years and identify themselves as 'chronic worriers'. This doesn't sound like what you're saying.

Panic disorder (which runs in families) can come on suddenly and leave you with intense feelings of anxiety and episodes in which you feel you like you're going to die because of how tense you feel. You mentioned that the medication your M.D. prescribed didn't work. Be aware that even though tranquilizers are similar, not all agree with people in the same way. I would go back to your doctor, ask him about some of the possible physical problems I mentioned. If these seem not to be a problem, then perhaps there is some underlying anxiety issue (which can be hereditary) that has come into your life. If this is the case, go to www.nimh.gov and look under anxiety. If your anxiety is interfering in your everyday life, you should be getting treatment for it just as though you were having a physical problem that was getting in the way of living. If your doctor is not sympathetic, you might consider someone else who is.

Dr. K.