



# WELL-BEING

## Column

## When anxiety gets the upper hand

Anxiety: friend or foe? We ask this question for the simple reason that everyone has to cope with anxiety at some point in their life. It's a basic, universal human emotion that exists for a reason. Anxiety is a valuable tool: it helps us face challenging circumstances, respond appropriately to danger, and be more alert in situations that require an immediate reaction.

Feeling anxious prevents us from taking unnecessary risks and prompts us to flee from situations that we cannot handle, such as a fire or an assault.

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety can be described as an unpleasant sense of tension, a feeling of fear or apprehension; it can prompt physical reactions such as heart palpitations, shortness of breath and chest pain. But when such a response is accompanied by negative thoughts and feelings of fear, a chain reaction ensues: the physical sensations worsen and the result is a panic attack. Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness, which is perfectly normal when a stressful situation arises, such as public speaking. It becomes a disorder, however, when the anxiety is so overwhelming that it starts to interfere on a daily basis; a person may feel a loss of control, avoid certain situations, ignore tasks, or give up activities. Anxiety disorders affect between 4.7% and 7.5% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2003; Kessler et al.). Anxiety can be generalized across a range of situations, or it may be situation-specific.

When anxiety attacks occur time after time, in the same situations and with the same intensity, to the point of causing significant distress, it could very well be one of the following anxiety disorders:

- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Phobias
- Obsessive-compulsive disorders
- Panic disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

### Multiple causes

Acute anxiety is caused by a combination of factors. One of these, researchers believe, is biological, whereby a more vulnerable nervous system predisposes certain people to have a reduced tolerance to fear and stress. Social factors also play an important role. For instance, highly anxious parents tend to transmit their worries and concerns to their children, sometimes simply in the way they hold or touch them. Children themselves who have experienced abandonment, stress, trauma or an insecure environment, can develop an anxiety disorder. Lastly, other factors can prolong or worsen anxiety, such as facing a situation that conflicts with long-held opinions or beliefs, intense periods of stress in the workplace, depressive symptoms, or alcohol or nicotine withdrawal, to name just a few.

Do any of these scenarios strike a chord? If you find your anxious feelings are spiralling out of control and draining your energy, day in, day out, you might well have an anxiety disorder. While your anxiety may never disappear completely, it is possible to treat the condition, overcome certain fears, and acquire the necessary tools to deal with everyday stressors. Anxiety is one of the most common reasons for seeking counselling. So, you're not the only one, and you're no longer alone. Our professional team will help you get on the right treatment path!