

Anxiety Disorders and the Family Tree

By Genevieve Milnes
CCAA (Clin), PACFA (Reg), MAPS

Have you ever suffered some tightness in the chest, a little catching of the breath or a slight panic at the thought that a special event or a worrying exam is just ahead and somehow you have to get through the next hour or the next day? What you have experienced is called normal anxiety, worry or panic and we all suffer from it at some time in our lives depending on the amount of pressure or expectations that we put on ourselves. However did you know that about one in twenty people suffers from an anxiety disorder? That's when the normal levels of anxiety stay around for the most part of the day, for days at a time, and when you can't escape the gnawing pain in your heart or stomach, or the awful guilt that won't stop stalking you even though what you did or thought you did wasn't really that bad. Some people have specific fears such as a fear of heights, of spiders, of mice or open spaces. Others are brought to a standstill by a recent trauma, or strangely enough a trivial event!

MAIN CAUSES OF ANXIETY

So what is it that causes such reactions in people and why do those reactions come in so many different ways? The researchers have identified three main reasons why people react to stressors in the way that they do: genetic predisposition, personal characteristics (upbringing and life experiences), and biochemistry.

GENETIC PREDISPOSITION

I have struggled with the idea that one's genetic predisposition contributes so significantly to anxiety. Yet, when I looked at my own family tree I could identify the anxious gene quite strongly! It went back for at least three generations and no doubt well beyond that. Then I looked at how individuals in my family tree dealt with anxiety. I observed the variety of ways in which adults had learned to calm their fears in different ways. Some had been hospitalised for short periods of time for an anxiety disorder while others had managed to stay off medication and out of hospital. Not that every person in my family tree had an anxiety disorder! But there was certainly a thread that I could follow.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

I began to talk to different family members about their anxieties and fears and found that each of them expressed similar apprehensions and 'silly' little fears and idiosyncrasies. Some had problems sleeping, or a desire to stay up late and immerse themselves in passions such as sewing, studying, or cooking, and there was a common thread of getting just a bit too excited about these activities. Some expressed that they couldn't sleep from the excitement they had created by immersing themselves in their projects and would stay awake for hours thinking through their projects.

PREDICTED OUTCOMES

So what was the outcome of my genetic investigation? I found that I could identify certain family traits, and as the next generation of children arrived I could even make some predictions about which ones were more likely to suffer from anxiety. After talking to many family members I was able to trace the person in my family tree through whom this particular anxiety gene had come. Anxiety was fairly easy to trace in my family but I also became interested in other characteristics in other family members. It's not such a passion for me that I stay awake at night thinking about it! But the whole investigation showed me that there is certainly a genetic predisposition to many disorders, so it's always worth taking the time to map the family tree. It could save you a lot of time at the counsellor's rooms and a lot of money on medications.

COPING STRATEGIES

Learn from your observations of your immediate family. Look into your past to identify similar characteristics and family traits. Find out what ailed your grandparents and great grandparents because there is every chance that you are experiencing similar thoughts and concerns because of your genetic predisposition. Did your great grandmother lie awake excitedly thinking of the next cooking project? Did your grandfather experience too much apprehension and panic? How did he deal with it? If you have a problem with anxiety there's every chance that someone else in your family understands what you are going through and can share some strategies on how to cope.

■ Genevieve Milnes is the National President of Christian Counsellors Association of Australia. She holds a Bachelor of Divinity and Masters degrees in counselling and psychology and is head of Psychology Australia which is based in Guildford, Western Australia. You can visit her website at www.psychaust.com.au.

