



The Connection between Anxiety and Night Terrors

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Description

Night terrors are a type of sleep disturbance that can cause intense fear, confusion and physical agitation during sleep, often waking individuals from deep stages of sleep with distressing episodes. While they are most common in children, night terrors can affect adults as well and their connection to psychological factors such as stress and anxiety is increasingly being recognized. The science behind how anxiety fuels night terrors is complex and involves the interaction of psychological, neurological and physiological mechanisms. Here we study the link between anxiety and night terrors, shedding light on the processes that contribute to these unsettling sleep experiences.

Night terrors, also known as sleep terrors, occur during non-REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, specifically in the deeper stages of slow-wave sleep. During these episodes, individuals may exhibit signs of extreme fear, such as screaming, thrashing or rapid breathing, often without being fully awake or conscious of their surroundings. Unlike nightmares, which occur during REM sleep and are typically remembered upon waking, night terrors are usually forgotten by the individual upon waking fully. The body's inability to relax fully can, therefore, fuel the occurrence of these frightening sleep episodes.

One of the key factors linking anxiety to night terrors is hyper arousal, a state of heightened alertness that results from chronic stress. Anxiety causes the brain to remain in a state of "high alert," even during sleep, disrupting the body's natural transition into restorative sleep cycles. This disrupted sleep can lead to more frequent awakenings during the night, causing individuals to experience fragmented sleep patterns and sweating symptoms that mirror the physical manifestations of night terrors. In deep sleep, which is essential for physical and mental recovery, the brain is less capable of inhibiting fear responses, making night terrors more likely to occur when the person is suddenly aroused.

The limbic system, which is responsible for processing emotions and regulating the fight-or-flight response, plays a major role in the occurrence of night terrors. Anxiety and stress can over stimulate the amygdala, a key structure in the limbic system, which governs emotional responses such as fear. When the amygdala is overactive, it can trigger intense emotional reactions, even during sleep. This heightened emotional state can lead to the fear and terror experienced during night terrors, as the brain misinterprets certain sleep-related stimuli as threats, even in a safe environment. The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), responsible for regulating involuntary bodily functions like heart rate, breathing and blood pressure, is also influenced by anxiety. When anxiety is present, the sympathetic branch of the ANS is activated, preparing the body for fight-or-flight.

The science of how anxiety fuels night terrors reveals the intricate relationship between psychological stress and sleep disturbances. Anxiety triggers physiological changes in the body, including heightened arousal, increased emotional responses and activation of the autonomic nervous system all of which can contribute to the onset of night terrors. By understanding the mechanisms behind this connection, individuals experiencing anxiety-related night terrors can analyze treatments that target both the anxiety and the sleep disturbances, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques and medication. Addressing anxiety at its core is essential to breaking the cycle and improving sleep quality for those affected by night terrors.

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