best to avoid them. Avoiding these things or situations tends to make the fear stronger each time the person encounters them.

If you have an anxiety disorder, you may feel that it's ruling your life. In addition to worrying much of the time, you may be easily distracted and have trouble concentrating. You may feel stressed and tense or unable to relax. You may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, sweaty hands, upset stomach, pounding heart, and muscle tension. Like Morgan, you may find it nearly impossible to fall asleep. Some people have extremely intense symptoms - for example, people who are experiencing panic attacks may fear that they are having a heart attack or might even die.

But whether you think you might have an anxiety disorder or you know someone who does, understanding the disorder and its treatment can help.

Why Do People Get Anxiety Disorders?

There is no one cause for anxiety disorders. Several factors can play a role, including genetics, brain biochemistry, an overactive "fight or flight" response, life circumstances, and learned behavior.

Anxiety disorders tend to run in families, suggesting that there is a hereditary, or genetic, component to many of these conditions. A person who has a family member with an anxiety disorder has a greater chance of developing an anxiety disorder, though not necessarily the same type.

Genetics influence a person's brain biochemistry, and may make certain people more prone to problems with anxiety. The brain's biochemistry involves the brain's millions of nerve cells (called neurons) that constantly communicate with each other through chemicals called neurotransmitters.

Neurotransmitters are the brain's chemical messengers, and specific neurotransmitters help to regulate mood. Neurotransmitters are released from one neuron and attach to a receptor on another neuron. Sometimes there is interference with this process, such as if the receptor is blocked and unable to receive the neurotransmitter.

This interference can create an imbalance in the levels of the neurotransmitter in the brain, and can cause symptoms of anxiety. There are many kinds of neurotransmitters; two that are involved in anxiety are called serotonin and dopamine. When there's an imbalance of these chemicals, anxiety and other problems can occur.

Certain things that happen in a person's life can also set the stage for anxiety disorders. Frightening traumatic events that can lead to PTSD are a good example.

Early learning also plays a role. Growing up in a family where others are fearful or anxious can "teach" a child to view the world as a scary place. Likewise, if a child grows up in an environment that is actually scary or dangerous (if there is violence in the child's family or community, for example), the child may learn to be fearful or expect the worst.

The brain's automatic reaction to an anxiety-provoking situation also can fuel an anxiety disorder. Here's how this can happen: when a person senses danger (even if it doesn't turn out to be true danger), the brain quickly reacts by sending a signal to a small structure in the brain called the **amygdala** (pronounced: uh-**mig**-duh-luh). The amygdala immediately activates the body's automatic "fight or flight" response, and the body prepares itself for danger. This response is what triggers symptoms like sweating and a pounding heart.