

QUICK FACTS

- Anxiety is the mind and body's natural response to a real or perceived threat.
- Everybody experiences anxiety sometimes, but if it is distressing or overwhelming, or impacting on a person's day-to-day life, it might be a cause for concern.
- Lifestyle changes, self-help strategies, and mental health professionals can help people manage anxiety.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is something everyone experiences from time to time. It involves different thoughts and behaviours that can occur in response to a possible threat. Anxiety itself isn't bad. In fact, it's an important emotional and physical experience that can protect people from harm.

Anxiety can vary in strength, from mild to very severe. It can pass quickly or last a long time. It can be triggered by many situations, including social settings, performances or speeches, crowds, deadlines, health problems, or threats to safety and wellbeing.

Most people experience anxiety at some point in their life. It's also a common symptom of many mental health issues. A variety of anxiety disorders have been identified. Some of the most common anxiety disorders include generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder (panic attacks), and social anxiety disorder.

ANXIETY SYMPTOMS

Anxiety can involve symptoms like¹:

- Worrying: fearing or assuming the worst will happen; overestimating the danger of a situation; or assuming things will go wrong
- Difficulty controlling worry: having trouble managing anxious thoughts and feeling overwhelmed by them.
- A fear of uncertainty: being uncomfortable not knowing what is going to happen, or what to do.
- Avoidance: avoiding situations, people or places that cause anxiety.
- Safety behaviours: behaviours like checking or over-preparing to try to prevent a feared

outcome.

- Physical symptoms: these can include a pounding heart, difficulty breathing, upset stomach, muscle tension, headache, sweating or choking, feeling faint or shaky, or difficulty sleeping.
- Panic attacks: intense periods of fear, discomfort and physical symptoms, usually peaking within a few minutes.

Some people experience anxiety for their whole life and don't know what it feels like to live without anxiety – it feels normal to be worried and on edge. But living with chronic anxiety can cause long term impacts. These include increased risk of physical health issues, such as headaches, nausea, immune system problems, heart problems, and stomach problems.

CAUSES OF ANXIETY

Anxiety will feel different from person to person. Genetic factors and life experiences can impact both how serious a person's anxiety is, and what it feels like for them².

Part of what creates anxiety is the body's normal reaction to a perceived threat – the fight or flight response. The fight or flight response involves the body preparing for action. By increasing heart rate, muscle tension and fast breathing, bodies prepare to either fight or escape danger.

Though helpful for keeping people safe, these responses can feel overwhelming and confusing. Especially when it occurs when a person is not actually in danger, but going about everyday life.

MANAGING ANXIETY

Some people strategies like these are helpful to prevent, manage, or reduce their anxiety:

- Learning strategies to manage unhelpful thoughts, including understanding anxiety thought processes, and challenging or reframing anxious thoughts.
- Relaxation and breathing training to calm the body and mind.
- Developing and practicing mindfulness skills.
- Learning to gradually face (rather than avoid) situations that usually trigger anxiety.
- Looking after physical health through healthy eating, exercise, and sleeping well.
- Avoiding or reducing nicotine, caffeine, alcohol or other drugs.
- Accessing peer support

TREATMENT AND SUPPORT FOR ANXIETY

Not everybody who experiences anxiety needs mental health support. For many people, anxiety is a temporary experience, or mild enough to not cause problems.

But many people do find treatment and support helpful.

It's a good idea to talk to a GP first. A GP can provide information and referrals for other health professionals or support services.

Here are some psychological therapies that have been found to be helpful for managing anxiety disorders³:

- cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- exposure therapy
- psychodynamic therapy
- eye movement desensitisation reprocessing (EMDR)
- interpersonal psychotherapy.

Some people also find medication helpful to manage their anxiety, particularly if it is severe or ongoing³

Anxiety is a normal part of life, but there are things you can do to help manage it if it is causing problems. To connect with others who get it, visit our online Forums. They're safe, anonymous and available 24/7.

[VISIT FORUMS](#)

RESOURCES

- [Anxiety self-assessment](#) (Black Dog Institute)
- [Anxiety](#), [worry](#) and [panic](#) self-help resources (Centre for Clinical Interventions)
- [Recommended Apps for managing anxiety](#) (Very Well Mind)

REFERENCES

1. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5). In: 5th ed. American Psychiatric Association; 2013.
2. Gottschalk MG, Domschke K. Genetics of generalized anxiety disorder and related traits. Dialogues in clinical neuroscience. 2017 Jun;19(2):159-68.
3. Bandelow B, Reitt M, Röver C, Michaelis S, Görlich Y, Wedekind D. Efficacy of treatments for anxiety disorders: a meta-analysis. International clinical psychopharmacology. 2015;30(4):183-92.