

# Understanding Anxiety

## *And What Can Help*

Everyone feels some anxiety at different times in life. Feeling tense, scared or worried is a normal response to something stressful or dangerous. It's how your body tries to keep you out of dangerous situations and motivates you to solve problems. In many cases, these sorts of feelings pass once the stressful situation has passed. In some cases, however, anxious thoughts and feelings don't ease.

### What is Anxiety?

Anxiety becomes a problem when anxious thoughts and feelings don't go away, when they happen without any particular reason or cause, and when they make it hard to cope well with everyday life. There are a number of different types of anxiety disorders. Many people with anxiety experience symptoms of more than one type of anxiety condition (and may experience depression as well). The most common types of anxiety disorders include...

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):** A person with GAD feels anxious and tense on most days, worrying about lots of different things, for a period of six months or more. Those with GAD feel anxious and worried most of the time, not just in specific stressful situations. These worries are intense, persistent, and interfere with normal life.

Worries can relate to several aspect of everyday life, including work, health, family and/or financial issues, rather than just one issue. Even minor things such as household chores or being late for an appointment can trigger intense reactions and lead to a feeling that something terrible will happen. Sometimes people with this GAD are unable to say what they are worried about. They report feelings that something bad may happen, or that they just can't calm themselves.

**Social anxiety:** A person with social anxiety feels very anxious and excessively self-conscious in everyday social situations. Social anxiety can be limited to only one type of situation - such as a fear of speaking in front of groups, or eating or drinking in front of others. In its most severe form, however, someone with social anxiety may experience symptoms almost anytime they are around other people.

**Panic disorder:** A person with panic disorder experiences unexpected and repeated panic attacks (episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms). Physical symptoms may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, sweating, shaking, and abdominal distress. Frightening thoughts may include, 'I'm going to die,' 'I can't breathe,' 'This isn't going to stop,' and 'I'm having a heart attack'. These episodes reach a peak within minutes. Panic attacks can feel overwhelming, but they do pass.

**Specific phobias:** A person with a phobia feels very fearful about a particular object or situation and may go to great lengths to avoid it (for example, having an injection or travelling on a plane). There are many different types of phobias.

## Signs and symptoms of anxiety

People with anxiety experience changes in thinking, feeling, physical wellbeing and behavior. The table below outlines some common signs and symptoms of anxiety. Not everyone suffering from an anxiety disorder will experience all of these symptoms.

Brain and Beliefs	Body and Behavior
Worrying about things a lot (even things you feel like you “shouldn’t” logically be worried about) Trouble controlling worries or stopping thinking about things that make you feel stressed or anxious Difficulty concentrating Being emotionally reactive (having quick and intense emotional reactions to stressors) Being irritable Feeling unable to relax, constantly wound up and on edge	Rapid heartrate and shallow, quick breathing Feeling tense and having aches (especially in neck, shoulders, and back) Being easily startled Difficulty falling asleep (or staying asleep) Feeling tired a lot of the time Feeling restless, muscle twitches and trembles Stomach upsets—“butterflies” in your stomach, feeling sick, or needing to go to the bathroom a lot Avoiding people or places Withdrawing from friends and family

## How common is anxiety?

Research suggests that people from all different countries and cultures experience anxiety. In fact, the World Health Organization has stated that anxiety disorders are the most prevalent type of mental health disorder worldwide.

Some quick facts about anxiety:

- ✓ About 1 in 3 people will experience an anxiety disorder at some point during their life.
- ✓ Women are approximately twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with anxiety.
- ✓ About 3-7% of the global population has an anxiety disorder at any given time.

## What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is complicated, and doctors and researchers are learning more about it all the time. Most experts believe that a combination of factors leads to extremely high levels of anxiety rather than one isolated cause. Some of those relevant factors may include:

- **Genetic vulnerability and brain chemistry.** Mood regulating neurotransmitters in the brain may not be functioning normally.
- **Personality factors** linked to high sensitivity, perfectionism, being ‘Type A’, shyness, being more pessimistic, low self-esteem and others.
- **Family history and modeling.** People can “learn” anxious and reactive responses to challenges from caregivers and others.

- **The presence of ongoing stress** related to chronic health problems, relationship conflicts, work, finances, and other issues.
- **Health conditions** such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease can trigger anxiety disorders.
- **Pregnancy and childbirth.** Anxiety is quite common during pregnancy and after the birth (postnatal anxiety). About 1 in 7 childbearing women show signs of extreme anxiety during pregnancy or following delivery.
- **Previous life experiences.** Events that cause considerable distress (such as a major natural disaster or witnessing a death) can trigger anxiety disorders.
- **Substance abuse.** Use of (or withdrawal from) drugs and medication such as cannabis, alcohol, and sedatives can trigger anxiety.

## What Helps: Effective Treatments For Anxiety

It's important to seek support early if you're experiencing anxiety. Your symptoms may not go away on their own. In fact, if left untreated they may become even more intense, exhausting, debilitating, and start to take over your life. There are a range of effective treatments for anxiety. The sooner people with anxiety get help, the more likely they are to recover. Here are four research-supported treatments for anxiety...

1. **Exercise and other lifestyle changes:** Exercise can help by increasing the level of certain neurotransmitters and endorphins (“feel good”) chemicals in the brain. In general, people who meet the World Health Organization’s Exercise Guidelines (150 minutes of moderate exercise a week for healthy adults aged 18-64) experience better mental health than those who don’t. When using exercise to help relieve symptoms of depression it is recommended to start with 20 minutes of moderate exercise 3 times a week and gradually increase to 30 minutes of moderate exercise on at least 5 days of the week. Research also suggests that certain lifestyle changes aimed at reducing your stress levels will often help ease symptoms of anxiety.
2. **Reputable self-help resources:** Self-help resources (such as online courses) can also be very helpful. Many of these online resources are free. They are also anonymous and easily accessible for anyone with internet access. Where symptoms of anxiety are moderate to severe, therapy and/or medication should also be explored.
3. **Therapy:** Therapy can help by teaching you new ways to think about your experiences and other ways of coping, as well as providing supportive connections. There are a variety of approaches to therapy that can help treat anxiety, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Behavior Therapy (including exposure therapy). Online therapeutic programs can also be very helpful.
4. **Medication:** Medication can be useful for alleviating the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and is often prescribed in conjunction with other therapies. Some types of anxiety medication can be habit-forming, and it is usually prescribed on a short-term or as-needed basis. Some antidepressants can also have a role in treating anxiety. There are changes in brain chemistry that accompany anxiety, and sometimes antidepressants can help address this.

Different types of anxiety disorders require different treatments. As we are all individuals with different contributing factors, we all respond differently to treatment. Often, however, a combination of treatments works best to treat anxiety.

## How Can You Help Yourself If You Think You May Have An Anxiety Disorder?

If you think you may be experiencing unusually high levels of anxiety, or have an anxiety disorder, it is important to begin doing things that will help. Here's where to start:

1. **Seek professional support from a doctor and/or a counselor.** Seek trustworthy professional support and take their advice regarding trying medication and/or therapy. In addition to many other benefits, connecting with a counselor can help motivate you to do everything else on this list.
2. **Tell those close to you and people you trust.** Let your family and friends help you. If you don't know *how* they can help you, ask one of them to discuss items #1 and #3 on this list with you and make an action plan together.
3. **Consider ways to reduce stress and set realistic goals for self-care:** Explore ways you can reduce stress and pressure in your life, identify some self-care priorities (e.g., related to exercise and nutrition), and set realistic goals. Do what you can as you can without overloading yourself or risking physical injury.
4. **Notice your thinking patterns:** Being aware of what thoughts are influencing your anxiety is an important step towards managing it. This awareness will help you understand what contributes to your anxiety and what your triggers are. This can help you handle stressful situations and triggers differently and learn new ways to cope.
5. **Learn helpful breathing strategies:** Lots of anxiety symptoms involve a cycle of physical sensations. Working on controlling your breathing is a good way to try to interrupt that cycle.
6. **Get regular exercise:** Start getting more regular exercise as you are able, with the aim of increasing to 30 minutes of moderate exercise at least 5 times a week. If you have the option of exercising outdoors, do that. If you're not used to getting exercise, start slow and build up.
7. **Learn other helpful coping skills:** There are a variety of coping strategies that can help manage anxiety, including helpful self-talk, visualization, and relaxation strategies. Learn more about these and start to try them out.
8. **Be aware of avoidance and take baby steps to facing fears.** It's normal to want to avoid situations that make you feel anxious. Avoidance may help you feel better in the short-term, but over time it can make your anxiety worse, because you don't get the opportunity to learn that the thing you fear may not happen or be as bad as you think. Learn some skills to cope with anxiety, then gradually face the things you fear and put your skills into action. As you realize you

can manage anxiety-provoking situations, you'll become more confident and motivated to keep it up.

9. **Limit alcohol use and other drugs:** Alcohol and many other drugs are central nervous system depressants. While these substances might help you to feel good or more relaxed in the short term, they can make you feel much worse, intensify anxiety, and cause other problems in the longer term.

## Where To Start Looking For More Information

**Anxiety disorders diagnosis and treatment (Mayo Clinic):** <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anxiety/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20350967>

**A guide to what works for anxiety: An evidence-based review:**  
<https://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/0762>

**The 7 Best Online Anxiety Support Groups in 2021:** <https://www.verywellmind.com/best-online-anxiety-support-groups-4692353>

**World Health Organization data about mental health disorder:** <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>

**Epidemiology of anxiety disorders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century** <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4610617/>

**Cross cultural aspects of anxiety disorders:** <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4037698/>

**What is the anxiety gender gap?** <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicebroster/2020/11/09/what-is-the-anxiety-gender-gap/>

**Depression and Anxiety: Exercise Eases Symptoms:** <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/depression/in-depth/depression-and-exercise/art-20046495>