

# Anxiety



Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorders diagnosed in Australia. While we may all experience anxiety at some point in life, it is important to seek help to manage your anxiety if it is affecting your ability to function in a regular way.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the excessive, uncontrollable and often irrational anticipation of future threats. It differs from fear, which is the emotional response to a real or perceived threat. While, these two states do overlap, there is a difference. Where fear is associated with the activation of the autonomic nervous system and the fight-flight-freeze response in reaction to an actual threat, anxiety is associated with excessive vigilance and associated avoidant behaviours for a perceived threat.

An anxiety disorder is diagnosed when the experience of fear and anxiety is considered excessive to the normal experience and is persistent beyond an expected timeframe. Individuals with an anxiety disorder typically overestimate the danger of the situations they fear or avoid.

### Anxiety disorders:

- Separation anxiety disorder – extreme fear or anxiety about separation from attachment figures that is not developmentally appropriate.
- Specific phobias – extreme fear or anxiety about a specific object or situation and subsequent avoidance of that object or situation. The fear or anxiety is disproportionate to the actual risk posed by the object or situation.

- Social anxiety disorder (social phobia) – extreme fear or anxiety about social interactions and situations where the person believes they will be negatively evaluated by others.

A person with social anxiety will avoid social interactions or situations where they believe they will be embarrassed, humiliated or rejected.

- Panic disorder – this condition is diagnosed when a person experiences recurrent unexpected panic attacks and is persistently concerned about having another panic attack. A panic attack is an abrupt surge of intense fear with accompanying physical symptoms and thoughts.
- Agoraphobia – extreme fear or anxiety about certain situations and the possibility of having a panic attack. Situations may include using public transport, being in open spaces, being in enclosed spaces, standing in line or being in a crowd, or being outside of the home alone. The cause of the fear or anxiety is subsequently avoided.
- Generalised anxiety disorder – persistent and excessive anxiety about a range of life domains including school, work, health or family. The person finds these difficult to control and experiences associated physical symptoms.

People may also experience anxiety in relation to substance use or withdrawal and other mental health conditions.



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## What contributes to anxiety?

There are a number of factors that contribute to anxiety:

- **Genetics** – it is believed there is a genetic component to anxiety. Individuals may be more vulnerable to develop anxiety if it runs in the family.
- **Thinking style** – people with anxiety have negative or unhelpful thoughts and beliefs that may perpetuate their condition.
- **Personality type** – certain people are more sensitive and cautious or fearful in nature making them more likely to develop anxiety.
- **Stress or trauma** – following a stressful or traumatic event, a person may develop anxiety as a response to the event.
- **Physical health** – people in poor physical health will not be as resilient to dealing with life stressors and may be more likely to develop anxiety.
- **Substance use** – certain substances, including cannabis and cocaine and even caffeine in high doses, can illicit the physical symptoms associated with anxiety, such as increased heart rate.
- **Other mental health conditions** – an anxiety disorder can be diagnosed in addition to another mental health condition, such as depression. It may be diagnosed as a feature of a mental illness, for example a psychotic disorder.
- **Avoidance behaviours** – certain behaviours perpetuate anxiety and prevent people from finding healthy ways to cope with their fears and anxiety. Avoidance as a coping strategy serves to reinforce the unhealthy thinking that contributes to the anxiety disorder.



## Symptoms of anxiety

Listed below are some of the common physical signs and symptoms associated with anxiety:

- Restlessness
- Feeling on edge
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling lightheaded or faint
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Upset stomach
- Sweating
- Sleep disturbance

## How to manage anxiety

Anxiety is a manageable condition. It is important to seek help to manage your anxiety if it is preventing you from functioning in a normal way. If you know someone who is affected by anxiety encourage them to seek help and reassure them that there are treatment options available. Below are some strategies you may find helpful if you are experiencing anxiety:

- Identify how you are feeling and acknowledge your emotional response in relation to the situation. Accept your experience and talk to someone about how you are feeling.
- Focus on your breath - An example of a breathing technique is provided below:  
  
Breathe in slowly, counting silently to yourself:  
1...2...3...4...5...Hold your breath for a moment.  
Breathe out slowly, counting silently to yourself:  
1...2...3...4...5...  
  
Continue to breathe in this way for a few minutes to assist your heart rate to reduce.
- Practice meditation. There are guided meditations available online and apps you can download for free. Some examples include:
  - headspace Meditation App:  
[www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app](http://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app)
  - Smiling Mind Meditation for Young People: [www.smilingmind.com.au](http://www.smilingmind.com.au)

- Avoid negative coping strategies and avoidance techniques
  - People with anxiety may use substances such as alcohol, other drugs or other unhelpful coping strategies (such as avoidance techniques) to provide short-term relief, however these can exacerbate anxiety in the long-term. It is important to face your fears and learn to 'sit with your emotions'. If this is too difficult, it is best to seek support and treatment.
- Engage in a treatment for anxiety. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is an effective evidence-based treatment for anxiety disorders. CBT addresses the thoughts that contribute to anxiety and assists with behavioural change including reducing the tendency to avoid things that provoke anxiety.

## Where to go to for support?

Visit your GP to discuss your symptoms and to rule out any underlying physical health issues. Your GP can prescribe medication if necessary and refer you to local health professionals that provide therapeutic treatment.

There are also a range of evidence based online treatment programs for anxiety disorders:

- Phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 (available 24/7) or chat to a Crisis Supporter online at [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au) (7pm – midnight every night)
- MindSpot – [www.mindspot.org.au](http://www.mindspot.org.au)
- E-couch – an online therapy program for young people experiencing anxiety, depression, grief and anger: <https://ecouch.anu.edu.au/welcome>

- This Way Up – clinician assisted online CBT course for generalised anxiety, panic disorder, social phobia, specific phobias and trauma: [www.thiswayup.org.au/self-help](http://www.thiswayup.org.au/self-help)

For local services and centres in your area, including mental health and anxiety support services, visit the Lifeline Service Finder Directory at [www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/service-finder](http://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/service-finder)

Everyone worries from time to time; however, anxiety disorders can negatively impact your quality of life. Learn about the symptoms and steps you can take to help manage anxiety to reduce the impact on your everyday life.

For 24-hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14. For more information visit [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)



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