

What is an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety is a normal feeling that people experience when faced with danger, threatening situations or when under stress. Feelings of anxiety can be a result of life experiences such as losing your job, relationship difficulties, serious illness or any major life change or loss. Feeling anxious in these situations is appropriate and the anxiety usually only lasts for a limited time. However, sometimes these feelings of anxiety become disabling and prevent us from functioning in our lives as we normally would, or they persist for much longer than would be expected, and it is at these times that you might find that the normal anxiety has become an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are not just one illness, but a group of illnesses characterised by persistent feelings of anxiety, and extreme discomfort and tension that are severe enough to interfere significantly with daily life. Symptoms of anxiety include intense physical sensations such as breathlessness, palpitations, sweating, trembling, feelings of choking, nausea, abdominal distress, dizziness, pins and needles, feelings of losing control or feelings of impending doom. Anxiety disorders are the most common form of mental illness. They often begin in early adulthood, but can start in childhood or in later life.

What are the main types of anxiety disorders?

There are a number of different anxiety disorders.

- **Generalised anxiety disorder**

Generalised anxiety disorder is diagnosed when someone worries persistently, uncontrollably and unrealistically about everyday things, such as health, family, friends, money, or career. People with this disorder worry constantly and irrationally about harm affecting themselves or their loved ones, and the worry is accompanied by a feeling of constant apprehension. They often develop associated physical conditions such as stomach problems or chronic muscle pain.

- **Panic disorder with and without agoraphobia**

People with this disorder experience extreme anxiety in situations where most people would not be afraid. A panic attack typically starts with very unpleasant physical symptoms of anxiety, such as feeling like you are having a heart attack or are choking. There is also fear of “going crazy” or fear that the attack will lead to death or a total loss of control. These fears lead some people to start to experience agoraphobia, which can severely interfere with their lives.

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○ **Agoraphobia**

Agoraphobia is a fear of being in places or situations from which it may be difficult or embarrassing to get away, or where help might be unavailable if needed. People with agoraphobia most commonly experience fear in a cluster of situations such as supermarkets or shopping malls, crowded places of all kinds, confined spaces, public transport, lifts and so on.

○ **Specific phobia**

Many people have one or two irrational fears, but phobias are intense fears about particular objects or situations that interfere with a person's life. These might include fear of heights, water, dogs, closed spaces, snakes, or spiders. Someone with a specific phobia is fine when the feared object is not present. However, when faced with the feared object or situation, they can become highly anxious or even experience a panic attack. People affected by phobias can go to great lengths to avoid situations that would force them to confront the object or situation they fear.

○ **Social phobia**

Social phobia is a strong and persistent fear of social or performance situations. The person fears they will be scrutinised and negatively judged by others or that they will embarrass themselves in front of others. Social phobia can interfere significantly with a person's life because people cope by avoiding the social situation or enduring it with intense distress. They may limit what they do in front of others –especially eating, speaking, drinking, or writing – or withdraw from contact with others.

○ **Obsessive compulsive disorder**

Obsessions are intrusive thoughts or images that occur out of the blue and are distressing to the individual who experiences them. They may take many forms but common thoughts include blasphemous thoughts, thoughts that the person is dirty or contaminated in some way, sexual thoughts or thoughts of harming others.

Compulsions are acts that are repeated over and over and which are difficult to resist and difficult to stop. These may be in the form of rituals that must be performed in order to 'neutralise' an obsession. For example, someone who has thoughts of being dirty must wash their hands repeatedly in order to cleanse themselves.

Someone with an obsessive compulsive disorder has frequent obsessions and/or compulsions that take up a significant part of their day and interfere with their daily life. They often find the disorder shameful and try to keep their compulsions and obsessions secret from those around them.

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○ **Post-traumatic stress disorder**

It is normal to experience distress, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and recurrent thoughts of trauma following a traumatic experience. However, when these symptoms are severe and persistent and continue to impact on a person's daily life long after the initial traumatic event, a diagnosis of PTSD may be made.

People with PTSD experience symptoms of avoidance, avoiding any situation or object that might remind them of the trauma and sometimes feeling emotionally blunted or numbed. They might also have nightmares or flashbacks during which they re-experience the traumatic events in a vivid and frightening way, as well as finding that their nerves are on edge and they are easily frightened by minor occurrences such as loud noises. These symptoms can be very disabling and result in an inability to function normally socially, at home or at work.

Co-occurring mental health problems

People often have more than one anxiety disorder and may also develop depression. Harmful alcohol and other drug use may also co-occur as a means of 'self-medicating' to cope with the anxiety. This makes treatment more complex and the drug and alcohol use will also need to be managed effectively.

What causes anxiety disorders?

There are many interrelated factors associated with anxiety disorders. The causes of a particular disorder vary, and it is not always easy to determine a cause in every case.

○ *Genetic factors*

It is well established that the tendency to develop anxiety disorders runs in families. This is similar to a predisposition to other illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease. People may also learn anxious responses from parents or other family members.

○ *Biochemical factors*

Some anxiety disorders may be related to disturbances in chemicals called neurotransmitters that carry 'messages' along nerve pathways in the brain. There are also a few medical conditions that may predispose people to developing an anxiety disorder, the most common condition being hyperthyroidism or having too much thyroid hormone in the body.

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○ *Temperament*

People with certain temperaments are more prone to anxiety disorders. People who are easily aroused and upset, and are very sensitive and emotional, are more likely to develop anxiety disorders. People who as children were inhibited and shy may be prone to develop certain anxiety disorders, such as social phobia.

○ *Learnt response*

Some people exposed to situations, people or objects that are upsetting or anxiety-arousing may develop an anxiety response. This response can be re-activated when faced with or thinking about the situation, person, or object again.

○ *Stress*

Stressful life experiences are associated with the development of some anxiety disorders, particularly posttraumatic stress disorder.

Treatment

Anxiety disorders can be very effectively treated. Although each disorder has its own specific characteristics, most respond well to psychological treatments and/or medication. Treatments combining both psychological therapy and medication often have better long-term results.

Effective treatments for anxiety disorders include the following:

○ *Psychological therapies*

Therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), are aimed at changing patterns of thinking, behaviours, and beliefs that may trigger anxiety. Therapy may also involve gradually exposing a person to situations that trigger their anxiety (desensitisation).

○ *Anxiety management and relaxation techniques.*

Your therapist may teach you relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and breathing exercises. Biofeedback is a treatment technique in which people are trained to improve their health by using signals from their own bodies. Meditation and certain types of exercises, such as yoga, can also be very helpful in managing anxiety.

○ *Antidepressants*

Antidepressants, especially those that influence serotonin levels in the brain, play an important role in the treatment of some anxiety disorders as well as treating associated or underlying depression.

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- *Other medications*

Tranquilizers can be useful in the short-term to treat severe anxiety, but most can cause dependence if used regularly over a long period so must be used under the direction of a medical professional.

Other medications such as some antipsychotics (sulpiride, fluanxol) also help to control anxiety, and sleeping tablets may also be used in the short-term to help with insomnia which is a common symptom of anxiety disorders.

Medication will not cure anxiety disorders but can keep symptoms under control while a person receives psychological treatment.