

ANXIETY

What is it?

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time, whether it is preparing for a big presentation or meeting the in-laws. However, an anxiety disorder is more than feeling worried or stressed. It is still feeling anxious long after the situation has passed.

Feelings of anxiety are persistent and hard to control. They may seem to appear for no apparent reason and impact your ability to carry out your everyday activities.

Who does it affect?

Anxiety is the most prevalent psychological disorder. One third of the population are affected by an anxiety disorder during their lifetime. In any one year, over two million Australians will experience anxiety. Women are more likely to develop anxiety than men, and it is more common during midlife.

What does it look like?

Symptoms of anxiety are not always obvious, they present in different ways for different people and can develop slowly over time.

Anxiety may present itself in your thoughts, behaviours and feelings.

Thoughts

- Excessive fear
- Worry
- Catastrophising - seeing a situation as considerably worse than it is
- Obsessive thinking

Behaviours

- Avoidance of situations or objects that create feelings of anxiety,
- Impacting upon your social, work or study life

Feelings/Experiences:

- Panic attacks
- Hot and cold flushes,
- Racing heart
- Tightening of the chest
- Rapid breathing
- Restlessness

What are the different types?

Anxiety can present itself in our reaction to different environments and thoughts.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD): feeling anxious most days and worrying about a variety of different things. These emotions are long lasting over a period of six or more months.

Social Anxiety: feeling anxious at the possibility of being criticised, embarrassed or humiliated by others. This includes all types of social interaction, including eating in public, making small talk or asking a colleague a question.

Specific Phobias: feeling anxious about a particular object or situation, for example arachnophobia (phobia of spiders). People with specific phobias often go to great lengths to avoid it.

Panic Disorder: a panic attack involves overwhelming feelings of anxiety with physical symptoms of shortness of breath, chest pain and dizziness. Panic disorder occurs when these attacks become recurrent and interfere with daily functioning. It is also common to have anxious feelings or worry about having a panic attack may lead to the person avoiding certain situations for fear of having a panic attack.

It is important to remember that anxiety can often occur with depression and if you have one you are more likely to have the other. They can both be managed but it is important to recognize your specific situation. A mental health professional will be able to help you identify if you are experiencing signs and symptoms of depression with your anxiety and will be able to assist with improvement strategies.

What are the treatment options?

Treatment can significantly reduce and even eliminate the symptoms of anxiety. Treatment may include a combination of medication, individual therapy and community support.

- It is important to talk about how you are feeling. Ask for help and speak to someone you trust, whether a health professional family member or friend. A general practitioner is a good place to start when seeking help and information. They can then refer you to see a psychologist where appropriate.
- Most people are able to recover from anxiety when they receive professional treatment. Treatments are usually based on psychological therapy where a psychologist talks with the person about their symptoms, and discusses alternative ways to think about them and cope with them.
- Where required, certain medications assist the brain to restore its usual chemical balance and help control the symptoms of anxiety..

- Depending on the type of treatment, most people start to feel better or notice an improvement, after about two to six weeks.
- Healthy eating and exercise can help improve anxiety symptoms. Try relaxation techniques, writing down your feelings, reducing stress and avoiding alcohol and other drugs, but remember that some days will be better than others. Overcoming anxiety can take time so it is important to be kind to yourself and seek the relevant professional assistance.

DIY Tips & Strategies

1. **Take deep breaths.** This is a tried and tested method, but it works! Try breathing in through your nose for 3 counts and then pretend you are breathing out through a straw for 5 counts. Keep track of your breathing to have it settle down.
2. **Exercise.** Exercise decreases stress hormones and increases endorphins. Endorphins are the body's natural feel good chemicals, and when they are released through exercise, your mood is boosted naturally.
3. **Eat well** and avoid stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine. A healthy diet makes the body strong and increases a sense of well-being.
4. **Social support.** Using your support networks is a large factor for coping with anxiety. We do not need to be able to 'do it all ourselves'.
5. **Practise mindfulness.** Mindfulness is about being completely in-touch with the present moment. Practice being totally present to the moment at least once a day.
6. **Learn to overcome ANTS.** Coping statements put a stop to the automatic negative thoughts (ANTS) that lead to anxiety by replacing those thoughts with realistic, rational thoughts. A coping statement maybe *"This feeling is just anxiety; I'll take some deep breaths and I am going to let the uncomfortable feeling pass. I am ok."*
7. **Write your worries down.** Writing a control list or a journal can be a really good way to externalise your internal worries and anxious thoughts. Letting them out onto paper or the screen can get fresh air in amongst them and can help bring perspective and light.
8. **Refocus.** Shift your focus away from anxious thoughts and remember times when you overcame these emotions. Find out what works for you and aspire to do more of it.
9. **Find Help.** You don't have to find a path through anxiety by yourself. Everyone gets stuck from time to time and may need the assistance of an expert to help get back on track.

Services

If you require immediate assistance, please call emergency services.

For crisis counselling and support or more information:

Australia

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636

MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78

The United States of America

Mental Health America

Call [1-800-273-TALK \(8255\)](tel:1-800-273-TALK) OR Text MHA to 741741

You can also contact your GP or Family Physician for a referral to see a registered psychologist or psychiatrist.