



# DEALING WITH ANXIETY DISORDERS

**We all feel anxious from time to time – it might be about exam results, a job interview or even who will win the final of a sports match. This anxiety is a normal part of life and in fact is necessary to help us avoid danger or perform at our best. But, for some people, the feelings of anxiety can be much more extreme and become what's known as an anxiety disorder. This is more than feeling stressed – it's a serious condition that makes day-to-day life more difficult.**

## WHAT ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS AND WHO EXPERIENCES THEM?

Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling of fear or imminent disaster and is a normal emotional response to danger. The normal, healthy type of anxiety is usually brought on by some task in your life

right now, such as a test or job interview. It only lasts a day or so, and doesn't affect your health or day-to-day life. In many ways, a certain amount of anxiety is good for us, as it gets us hyped up to perform at our best.

But if you've got an anxiety disorder, the anxiety overwhelms you and gets in the way of other parts of your life – like how you do at school or work, and how you get on with other people. It'll usually be far more intense than normal anxiety, and go on for weeks, months or even longer.

Anxiety can be part your genetic and biochemical make up, as well as part of your personality. There are many things that can trigger anxiety, such as your environment, stressful situations like school exams and/or problems within the family or a trauma. Some causes of an anxiety disorder might be genetics (a history of anxiety in your family), disturbance of brain activity, or a stressful event (like a family break-up, abuse, ongoing bullying at school, sexual abuse, a death, a relationship break up, family conflict). Anxiety is not the same as depression, although the two conditions share many causes and some symptoms.

In Australia, anxiety disorders are common – one in six people aged 16 to 24 experience anxiety in any 12-month period (around one in ten males and one in five females).

## HELPING YOURSELF IF YOU HAVE AN ANXIETY DISORDER

There are many things that you can do to reduce anxiety in your life. Look at the things that are causing you stress and, if you can, change your lifestyle to avoid or confront those things. Looking after yourself will also improve your overall health and well-being.

### Staying healthy

- Make sure that you are eating healthy foods and regular meals, and try to stay active and get enough sleep. Regular exercise is also a good way to manage anxiety.

### Relaxing

- There are many ways to help yourself relax. You could try going for walks, doing a class like yoga or Tai Chi, learning to meditate or playing footy with a friend.

### Talking

- Bottling things up is likely to keep your anxiety levels high. If possible, talk to a friend about the things that are making you feel anxious and see if they can be sorted out.

### Alcohol and drugs

- These might seem to help, but they only make things harder in the long run.

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Info line: **1300 22 4636**

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## TYPES OF ANXIETY DISORDERS

**Panic Disorder** is when you experience recurrent panic attacks which lead to distress and affect your life. Panic attacks which happen once or twice are found in almost 40 per cent of the population. Panic attacks are sudden periods of intense fear or extreme anxiety, which suddenly happen out of the blue or when there is no sign of danger. The effects of a panic attack vary from person to person, but may include sweating, feeling short of breath, pounding heart, dry mouth, thinking that you're dying, losing control or about to collapse (or similar). The attacks may last for a few minutes or up to half an hour. Some people develop the fear of going into situations in which they worry they could not escape or get rescued when these panics happen. They may avoid a range of things like leaving the house or going to the shops – this is **Agoraphobia**. Panic attacks can also occur in the other anxiety disorders.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** involves anxiety which is related to a traumatic event (like an accident, sexual assault, violence or a natural disaster such as a bushfire). It is a problem if it continues more than one month after experiencing a seriously traumatic event. You may be experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder if you have difficulty relaxing, have upsetting dreams or flashbacks of the event, or avoid activities that remind you of the event.

**Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** involves unwanted thoughts and fears (obsessions) that cause anxiety and behaviours or rituals (compulsions) carried out to reduce the anxiety. For example, a fear of germs can lead to repeated washing of hands or clothes. You realise that these thoughts are irrational but the obsessions return all the time and the compulsions are hard to resist.

**Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** involves uncontrollable and unrealistic worry about everyday situations such as school, work, relationships or health. This worrying has to occur on most days for at least six months for a diagnosis of GAD.

**Specific Phobias** are disproportionately fearful feelings about a particular object or situation, like going near an animal, going to a social event, or receiving an injection. You may have a phobia if you avoid situations that involve the phobia (e.g. taking a different route to avoid a dog) and this causes you excessive distress or disables you.

**Social Phobia** involves anxiety which is severe and disabling when you are around people or have to do something in front of people, because you are afraid of looking foolish. It is much worse than being shy.

## GETTING HELP

Whatever type of anxiety you are experiencing, if it's interfering with areas of your day-to-day life, such as schoolwork and relationships with people, you probably need some help to get back on track. A good place to start is with your doctor, who can help you identify your anxiety disorder and find the best way to manage it. Your doctor may recommend some information to read and refer you to someone who specialises in anxiety disorders.

Common ways of treating anxiety include learning relaxation and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy techniques. Medication is prescribed also for some anxiety disorders in some circumstances (particularly OCD) but caution is generally needed in young people – see Youthbeyondblue Fact sheet 5 – *Antidepressants for the treatment of depression in children and adolescents*.

## KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- If you are feeling so anxious that it is affecting your day-to-day life, you may have an anxiety disorder and need help to manage it.
- It's important to recognise and treat anxiety problems as early as possible as this can prevent a lifetime of experiencing both anxiety and depression.
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can be very successful in helping people to manage an anxiety disorder.
- Managing your anxiety disorder may take time and there may be good days and not so good ones. Remember that dealing with your anxiety disorder is possible.
- Anxiety is not the same as depression, but the two conditions often go together. If you have anxiety and depression, both need to be treated.



### LOOK

for the signs of depression



### TALK

about what's going on



### LISTEN

to your friends' experiences



### SEEK HELP

together!

## MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

You can speak to trained counsellors by phoning these 24-hour telephone counselling services:

**Lifeline 13 11 14** (cost of a local call)

**Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800** (freecall)

Information and support is also available from the following websites:

**beyondblue** [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com) or [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

**headspace** [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

Information, support and help near you

**ReachOut.com** [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

Information and support for young people going through tough times

### National LGBT Health Alliance

[www.lgbthealth.org.au](http://www.lgbthealth.org.au) Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse people (LGBT)

The websites below can help you to find health services in your area. They list services that are either free of charge or low cost:

**Kids Help Line** [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

**Lifeline Service Finder**

[www.lifeline.org.au/service\\_finder](http://www.lifeline.org.au/service_finder)

**Reconnexion** [www.reconnexion.org.au](http://www.reconnexion.org.au)

**1300 273 266** Psychology services for people with anxiety, depression and tranquiliser dependency

If you or a friend want to communicate with someone via email or online, Kids Help Line offers confidential, non-judgemental, emotional support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

**SOURCES** This fact sheet is based on information from:

- **beyondblue** [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com) and [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- **ReachOut.com** [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

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