

# Anxiety



Occasional anxiety is often a part of everyday life, and can be caused by changing life circumstances such as job loss, an accident or the breakdown of a relationship. However, if you experience ongoing or severe anxiety that is out of proportion to the situation you are in, you may have an anxiety disorder.

Having anxiety can be distressing and affect every aspect of your life. Fortunately, there are treatments available that can help control anxiety symptoms and allow you to feel like yourself again.

## Anxiety symptoms

Anxiety affects us in a number of ways. Mentally, it can make you feel worried, nervous, tense or restless. You may be worried about the future or have ongoing thoughts and worries about events in the past. Some people with anxiety experience [panic attacks](#).

Anxiety can interfere with our attention and concentration, and cause a bias in the way we think — making us see the world as a scarier place than it really is. It also affects behaviour - people with anxiety tend to avoid situations they think will make them anxious.

Anxiety can also cause a range of physical symptoms and signs, such as:

- rapid pulse or [palpitations](#) (an awareness of their heart pounding);
- [dizzy turns](#);
- shaking;
- digestive upsets (such as lack of appetite, nausea or diarrhoea);
- muscle tension and soreness (often affecting the shoulders and jaw);
- teeth grinding;
- sweating;
- a tendency to breathe too quickly — [hyperventilation](#); and
- [insomnia](#) (difficulty sleeping).

## Anxiety disorders

Anxiety is abnormal when the amount of anxiety experienced is inappropriate for the situation. There are several different types of anxiety disorders and related conditions, all of which have different specific symptoms.

[Panic disorder](#) is when there are panic attacks (episodes of intense anxiety and fear), often with no obvious cause. Some people with panic disorder also develop agoraphobia, where the affected person avoids public places and crowds for fear of having a panic attack when out and about.

Phobias are intense, irrational fears. Specific phobias commonly involve a fear of animals (e.g. spiders, dogs); natural environments (e.g. heights, storms); medical procedures (e.g. needles, operations); or situations such as plane travel or being in enclosed spaces. Exposure to the phobia causes extreme anxiety and avoidance if at all possible.

[Social anxiety disorder](#) is like an extreme form of shyness, with an intense fear of negative judgement by others. It may be limited to intense anxiety about public speaking, or it may involve all situations where people feel 'on display' such as at parties or other social gatherings.

Generalised anxiety disorder is where there is an overwhelming and almost continuous feeling of anxiety. Generalised anxiety disorder will frequently cause physical anxiety symptoms. It is often associated with depression or other anxiety disorders.

[Obsessive compulsive disorder](#) (OCD) is a condition where the person has obsessions (recurring ideas, thoughts and impulses) and compulsions (repetitive behaviours in response to the obsessions, such as repeated hand washing, checking that taps are turned off or doors are locked). The intrusive thoughts are often of an unpleasant or even violent nature, and the person may feel very embarrassed by them and afraid they will somehow carry them out, but they never do. Most people with OCD are aware that their behaviour is excessive or unreasonable.

[Post-traumatic stress disorder](#) is common in war veterans, but can affect anyone who has been exposed to distressing events which are outside the normal range of human experience. A common trigger for PTSD is sexual assault. Often the traumatic event is re-lived over and over again in flashbacks and dreams.

## What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is the most common mental health problem in Australia, affecting one in 4 people at some stage of their lives. Anxiety disorders can affect both children and adults, and are thought to be caused by several factors, often in combination.

Most people with anxiety disorders have an inherited tendency to develop anxiety, which may be triggered by stressful life events. Your personality type can also influence your chances of developing an anxiety disorder.

Sometimes anxiety is due to a physical illness (such as a thyroid disorder or heart disease) or another mental health problem. Anxiety is often related to depression, and many people have symptoms of both anxiety and depression at the same time.

Drinking alcohol and taking recreational drugs can also cause or worsen anxiety.

## Tests and diagnosis

If you are experiencing anxiety, you should see your GP (general practitioner), who will ask about your symptoms and how long you have had them. Your GP will also want to examine you and may order some simple tests (such as blood tests) to rule out any physical conditions that may be causing your anxiety.

Treatment for your anxiety disorder can be started by your GP. They may also refer you to a psychologist (health professional trained in psychology) or a psychiatrist (doctor who specialises in mental health) for further assessment and

[treatment.](#)

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### References

1. SANE Australia. [Anxiety disorder guide](#) (updated 10 May 2018). <https://www.sane.org/mental-health-and-illness/facts-and-guides/anxiety-disorder#understanding-anxiety-disorders> (accessed Jul 2018).
2. Reavley NJ, Allen NB, Jorm AF, Morgan AJ, Ryan S, Purcell R. [A guide to what works for anxiety](#): 2nd Edition. beyondblue: Melbourne, 2013. <http://resources.beyondblue.org.au/prism/file?token=BL/0762> (accessed Jul 2018).
3. Mayo Clinic. [Anxiety disorders](#) (updated 4 May 2018). <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anxiety/symptoms-causes/syc-20350961> (accessed Jul 2018).

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