

Anxiety

+ YOUNG PEOPLE



Anxiety disorders are characterised by excessive fear and worry, which can seriously reduce a young person's ability to function in their day-to-day lives. Anxiety disorders are common – around 15% of Australians aged 16–24 experience an anxiety disorder each year.

There's no single cause for anxiety, but a number of factors can contribute, such as family history, genetic factors, personality traits, coping styles and the experience of stressful and traumatic life events (for example, bullying or the death of someone close).

Anxiety is treatable, and there are many resources available, including websites, self-help books and professional supports. Treatment helps young people learn to manage anxiety so that it has less of an effect on life.

What is anxiety and when is it ill-health?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or nervousness. It's an unpleasant emotion that everyone feels when faced with challenges or danger. Anxiety can be useful because it helps us prepare for and perform tasks.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it is intense, causes distress, lasts for a prolonged period of time and affects day-to-day living. Anxiety disorders can cause changes in a person's thinking, bodily sensations, behaviour and in how they respond to things. Young people can miss out on a lot of activities they enjoy because of anxiety, and it can get in the way of school, work, relationships and other important activities. Getting the right help can reduce the effect that anxiety has on a young person's quality of life.

Symptoms of anxiety

Common symptoms of anxiety include:

- persistent worry
- excessive fearfulness
- inability to relax
- problems with sleep
- avoidance of feared situations
- excessive shyness
- social isolation and problems with relationships
- difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- fear of social embarrassment
- problems with work, social, or family life
- physical symptoms, such as stomach-aches, headaches, muscle soreness, sweating, nausea and diarrhoea
- nightmares
- panic attacks.

What are panic attacks?

To prepare us for challenging situations – like for an exam, a gig, public speaking or finding a spider in our bedroom – our bodies have a natural 'fight or flight' response. This response increases our heart rate and muscle tension and we may also experience sweating, shaking and feeling butterflies in the stomach.

For a person with anxiety, these physical sensations occur more frequently and sometimes aren't connected to common anxiety-provoking situations. Young people with anxiety experience these symptoms regularly, and they can come on suddenly, unexpectedly and in many situations. If these physical sensations are intense and thoughts about fear of losing control or 'going crazy' accompany them, this can be described as a 'panic attack'.

What to look for?

If you're worried someone you know is experiencing anxiety, you can look for symptoms including:

- persistent worrying and excessive fear
- inability to relax

- seeking excessive reassurance, avoiding making decisions
- difficulty in concentrating, appearing distracted
- avoiding situations, not spending time with friends or family
- increased alcohol or other drug use
- poor sleep, physical ill-health, medically unexplained symptoms
- expressing anxious thoughts about themselves, their situation or future. For example, 'I can't cope', 'I'll make a fool of myself', 'They won't like me', 'What if something bad happens?', 'I might get hurt' etc.

What are the common anxiety disorders?

Social anxiety disorder

Social anxiety disorder is an intense and persistent fear of being humiliated, judged, or embarrassed in social situations. For example, a person with social anxiety disorder might feel extreme anxiety when having conversations, meeting new people, being observed, or performing in front of others. Often young people will fear or avoid social situations even though they recognise their anxiety and worry is unreasonable, excessive and significantly interferes with their life.

Panic disorder

A panic disorder is characterised by recurring and unexpected panic attacks. A panic attack is a surge of intense fear or discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes and leads to symptoms like heart palpitations, sweats, shaking, trouble breathing, chest pain, nausea, chills or feeling hot, feeling numb or detached, feeling dizzy or faint. Often, the physical symptoms are accompanied by thought about fear of losing control, 'going crazy', having a heart attack, dying or worry about having another panic attack. This can result in a young people avoiding certain situations and places to prevent themselves having a panic attack.

Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia can be a fear of using public transport, being in open spaces, being in enclosed spaces, being in a crowd or being away from home – such fear is out of proportion to the actual threat. Young people might fear that they won't be able to escape from these places if they have a panic attack, and they'll go to great lengths to avoid the feared environment. This means the young person frequently views home as 'safe'.

Generalised anxiety disorder

Generalised anxiety disorder includes spending a lot of time worrying about everyday things, like school, work, money, relationships or future events. Compared to how much those things bother other people, the worry of a generalised anxiety disorder is excessive and can feel out of control. Young people feel tense most of the time and may experience physical symptoms including muscle soreness, sweating, nausea or diarrhoea.

Separation anxiety disorder

Separation anxiety disorder is fear or anxiety, which isn't appropriate for the young person's age, about leaving or losing a parent, guardian or other support person. This type of worry can also lead to the young person having fears about being kidnapped, having an accident or being alone, and can lead to refusal or reluctance to leave the house, go to school or be social. The young person may sometimes experience physical symptoms, like stomach-aches and headaches, when separation occurs or they anticipate separation.

Other problems

Many young people who develop anxiety may also become depressed. Some young people may drink alcohol or take drugs to ease the worry or to make them feel more confident. Drinking alcohol or taking drugs may seem to work in the short-term by having a 'numbing' effect, but once this

feeling wears off people often feel worse. Drinking alcohol or taking drugs can also lead to dependence. This is when a person can't function without relying on substances, which can lead to long-term difficulties in general health, mental health and relationships. Getting the right support can assist with recovery from anxiety and with planning for getting on with education, work and relationships.

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Advice and referral

The first thing to do is to talk about the concerns and problems with a trusted person, such as with a school counsellor, family friend, a parent, guardian or a teacher. GPs can also help sort out what is and isn't an anxiety disorder and help with a plan for getting better.

If you think someone you know has an anxiety disorder, let them know you are there to support them, and, if needed, encourage them to get professional support.

There are effective treatments to help people who experience anxiety. The type of treatment will depend on the type of anxiety disorder being experienced. One of the most commonly used and most effective treatments for anxiety disorders is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is based on the idea that moods and emotions are influenced by thoughts. It explores thinking patterns and how they affect our behaviour and emotions, such as fear. There are other treatments for anxiety disorders including mindfulness, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and relaxation training. In certain instances, medication may also be helpful.

Getting help

If you are experiencing symptoms of anxiety, use these tips to get help and stop things getting worse.

- Talking to someone you trust helps. Tell family or friends about what you're feeling and thinking so they can support you.
- Try to eat healthily, get some regular exercise, and find ways to relax by doing things you enjoy, like listening to music, reading or other hobbies.
- Try to avoid alcohol and drugs – they often make anxiety worse over time and can lead to other problems, like dependency.
- Do some research to understand your treatment and recovery options – it may be useful to seek professional help from a counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist or doctor.

Further information

For further information regarding mental health and information in other languages visit:

www.orygen.org.au
www.headspace.org.au
www.reachout.com
www.youthbeyondblue.com
www.beyondblue.org.au
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
www.sane.org
www.healthdirect.gov.au
www.oyh.org.au

Related factsheets

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