



## Anxiety Disorders and Anxiety Attacks

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms and Getting Help



It's normal to feel anxious when facing a challenging situation, such as a job interview, a tough exam, or a blind date. But if your worries and fears are preventing you from living your life the way you'd like to, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder. There are many different types of anxiety disorders—as well as many effective treatments and self-help strategies. Once you understand your anxiety disorder, there are steps you can take to reduce your symptoms and regain control of your life.

### When does anxiety become a disorder?

Anxiety is the body's natural response to danger, an automatic alarm that goes off when you feel threatened, under pressure, or are facing a stressful situation.

In moderation, anxiety isn't always a bad thing. In fact, anxiety can help you stay alert and focused, spur you to action, and motivate you to solve problems. But when anxiety is constant or overwhelming—when it interferes with your relationships and activities—that's when you've crossed the line from normal anxiety into the territory of anxiety disorders.

#### Do you have an anxiety disorder?

If you identify with any of the following 7 signs and symptoms, and they just won't go away, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder:

1. Are you constantly tense, worried, or on edge?
2. Does your anxiety interfere with your work, school, or family responsibilities?
3. Are you plagued by fears that you know are irrational, but can't shake?
4. Do you believe that something bad will happen if certain things aren't done a certain way?
5. Do you avoid everyday situations or activities because they cause you anxiety?
6. Do you experience sudden, unexpected attacks of heart-pounding panic?
7. Do you feel like danger and catastrophe are around every corner?

## Signs and symptoms of anxiety disorders

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Because anxiety disorders are a group of related conditions rather than a single disorder, they can look very different from person to person. One individual may suffer from intense anxiety attacks that strike without warning, while another gets panicky at the thought of mingling at a party. Someone else may struggle with a disabling fear of driving, or uncontrollable, intrusive thoughts. Yet another may live in a constant state of tension, worrying about anything and everything.

But despite their different forms, all anxiety disorders share one major symptom: persistent or severe fear or worry in situations where most people wouldn't feel threatened.

### Emotional symptoms of anxiety

In addition to the primary anxiety symptoms of irrational and excessive fear and worry, other common emotional symptoms include:

- ▶ Feelings of apprehension or dread
- ▶ Watching for signs of danger
- ▶ Anticipating the worst
- ▶ Trouble concentrating
- ▶ Feeling tense and jumpy
- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Feeling like your mind's gone blank

## Physical symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety is more than just a feeling. As a product of the body's fight-or-flight response, anxiety involves a wide range of physical symptoms. Because of the numerous physical symptoms, anxiety sufferers often mistake their disorder for a medical illness. They may visit many doctors and make numerous trips to the hospital before their anxiety disorder is discovered.

Common physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- ▶ Pounding heart
- ▶ Sweating
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Stomach upset
- ▶ Dizziness
- ▶ Frequent urination or diarrhea
- ▶ Shortness of breath
- ▶ Muscle tension or twitches
- ▶ Shaking or trembling
- ▶ Insomnia

### The link between anxiety symptoms and depression

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Many people with anxiety disorders also suffer from depression at some point. Anxiety and depression are believed to stem from the same biological vulnerability, which may explain why they so often go hand-in-hand. Since depression makes anxiety worse (and vice versa), it's important to seek treatment for both conditions. To learn more about depression and what you can do about it, see [Depression Symptoms and Warning Signs \(/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm\)](/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm)

## Anxiety attacks and their symptoms

Anxiety attacks, also known as [panic attacks](/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm) (/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm), are episodes of intense panic or fear. Anxiety attacks usually occur suddenly and without warning. Sometimes there's an obvious trigger—getting stuck in an elevator, for example, or thinking about the big speech you have to give—but in other cases, the attacks come out of the blue.

Anxiety attacks usually peak within 10 minutes, and they rarely last more than 30 minutes. But during that short time, the terror can be so severe that you feel as if you're about to die or totally lose control. The physical symptoms of anxiety attacks are themselves so frightening that many people believe they're having a heart attack. After an anxiety attack is over, you may be worried about having another one, particularly in a public place where help isn't available or you can't easily escape.

### Symptoms of an Anxiety Attack

Surge of overwhelming panic

Feeling of losing control or going crazy

Heart palpitations or chest pain

Feeling like you're going to pass out

Trouble breathing or choking sensation

Hyperventilation

Hot flashes or chills

Trembling or shaking

Nausea or stomach cramps

Feeling detached or unreal

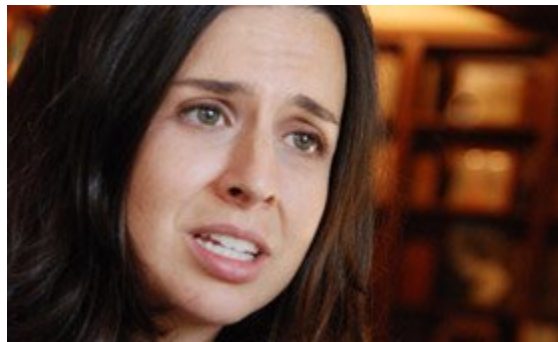
It's important to seek help if you're starting to avoid certain situations or places because you're afraid of having a panic attack. The good news is that panic attacks are highly treatable. In fact, many people are panic free within just 5 to 8 treatment sessions.

## Types of anxiety disorders

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There are six major types of anxiety disorders, each with their own distinct symptom profile: generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, phobia, social anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

### Generalized anxiety disorder



(/articles/anxiety/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad.htm)

If constant worries and fears distract you from your day-to-day activities, or you're troubled by a persistent feeling that something bad is going to happen, you may be suffering from [generalized anxiety disorder](/articles/anxiety/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad.htm) (GAD). People with GAD are chronic worrywarts who feel anxious nearly all of the time, though they may not even know why. Anxiety related to GAD often shows up as physical symptoms like insomnia, stomach upset, restlessness, and fatigue.

### Panic attacks and panic disorder



(/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm)

[Panic disorder](/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm) (/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm) is characterized by repeated, unexpected panic attacks, as well as fear of experiencing another episode. A panic disorder may also be accompanied by agoraphobia, which is the fear of being in places where escape or help would be difficult in the event of a panic attack. If you have agoraphobia, you are likely to avoid public places such as shopping malls, or confined spaces such as an airplane.

### Obsessive-compulsive disorder



(/articles/anxiety/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd.htm)

[Obsessive-compulsive disorder](/articles/anxiety/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd.htm) (/articles/anxiety/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd.htm) (OCD) is characterized by unwanted thoughts or behaviors that seem impossible to stop or control. If you have OCD, you may be troubled by obsessions, such as a recurring worry that you forgot to turn off the oven or that you might hurt someone. You may also suffer from uncontrollable compulsions, such as washing your hands over and over.

### Phobias and irrational fears



(/articles/anxiety/phobias-and-irrational-fears.htm)

A [phobia](/articles/anxiety/phobias-and-irrational-fears.htm) (/articles/anxiety/phobias-and-irrational-fears.htm) is an unrealistic or exaggerated fear of a specific object, activity, or situation that in reality presents little to no danger. Common phobias include fear of animals (such as snakes and spiders),

fear of flying, and fear of heights. In the case of a severe phobia, you might go to extreme lengths to avoid the thing you fear. Unfortunately, avoidance only strengthens the phobia.

### Social anxiety disorder and social phobia



(/articles/anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder.htm)

If you have a debilitating fear of being seen negatively by others and humiliated in public, you may have [social anxiety disorder](/articles/anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder.htm) (/articles/anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder.htm), also known as social phobia. Social anxiety disorder can be thought of as extreme shyness. In severe cases, social situations are avoided altogether. Performance anxiety (better known as stage fright) is the most common type of social phobia.

### Post-traumatic stress disorder



(/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-symptoms-self-help-treatment.htm)

[Post-traumatic stress disorder](/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-symptoms-self-help-treatment.htm) (/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-symptoms-self-help-treatment.htm) (PTSD) is an extreme anxiety disorder that can occur in the aftermath of a traumatic or life-threatening event. PTSD can be thought of as a panic attack that rarely, if ever, lets up. Symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks or nightmares about what happened, hypervigilance, startling easily, withdrawing from others, and avoiding situations that remind you of the event.

## Self-help for anxiety

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Not everyone who worries a lot has an anxiety disorder. You may be anxious because of an overly demanding schedule, lack of exercise or sleep, pressure at home or work, or even from too much coffee.

The bottom line is that if your lifestyle is unhealthy and stressful, you're more likely to feel anxious—whether or not you actually have an anxiety disorder. So if you feel like you worry too much, take some time to evaluate how well you're caring for yourself.

- ▶ Do you make time each day for relaxation and fun?
- ▶ Are you getting the emotional support you need?
- ▶ Are you taking care of your body?
- ▶ Are you overloaded with responsibilities?
- ▶ Do you ask for help when you need it?

If your stress levels are through the roof, [stress management](/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) (/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) can help. There may be responsibilities you can give up, turn down, or delegate to others. If you're feeling isolated or unsupported, find someone you trust to confide in. Just talking about your worries can make them seem less frightening.

### Anxiety self-help tips

**Connect with others.** Loneliness and isolation set the stage for anxiety. Decrease your vulnerability by connecting face-to-face with people who are supportive, caring, and sympathetic. Make it a point to regularly meet up with friends, join a self-help or support group, or share your worries and concerns with a trusted loved one. If you don't have anyone you can reach out to, it's never too late to [build new friendships](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) and a support network.

**Practice relaxation techniques.** When practiced regularly [relaxation techniques](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) such as mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing can reduce anxiety symptoms and increase feelings of relaxation and emotional well-being.



## Anxiety self-help tips

**Exercise regularly.** [Exercise is a natural stress buster and anxiety reliever.](/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm) To achieve the maximum benefit, aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise on most days (broken up into short periods if that's easier). Rhythmic activities that require moving both your arms and legs are especially effective. Try walking, running, swimming, martial arts, or dancing.

**Get enough sleep.** A lack of sleep can exacerbate anxious thoughts and feelings, so try to get seven to nine hours of quality sleep a night. If you struggle with sleep, [check out 7 tips for better sleep.](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm)

**Be smart about caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine.** If you struggle with anxiety, you may want to consider reducing your caffeine intake, or cutting it out completely. Same with alcohol, which can make anxiety worse. And while it may seem like cigarettes are calming, nicotine is actually a powerful stimulant that leads to higher, not lower, levels of anxiety. For help kicking the habit, see [How to Quit Smoking](/articles/addictions/how-to-quit-smoking.htm) (/articles/addictions/how-to-quit-smoking.htm).

**Train your brain to stay calm.** Worrying is a mental habit you can learn how to break. Strategies such as creating a worry period, challenging anxious thoughts, and learning to accept uncertainty can significantly reduce anxiety and fear. See: [How to Stop Worrying](/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm) (/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm)

## When to seek professional help for anxiety

While self-help coping strategies for anxiety can be very effective, if your worries, fears, or anxiety attacks have become so great that they're causing extreme distress or disrupting your daily routine, it is important to seek professional help.

If you're experiencing a lot of physical anxiety symptoms, you should start by getting a medical checkup. Your doctor can check to make sure that your anxiety isn't caused by a medical condition, such as a thyroid problem, hypoglycemia, or asthma. Since certain drugs and supplements can cause anxiety, your doctor will also want to know about any prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, herbal remedies, and recreational drugs you're taking.

If your physician rules out a medical cause, the next step is to consult with a therapist who has experience treating anxiety disorders. The therapist will work with you to determine the cause and type of your anxiety disorder and devise a course of treatment.

## Treatment for anxiety disorders

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**Anxiety disorders respond very well to therapy** (</articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm>)—and often in a relatively short amount of time. The specific treatment approach depends on the type of anxiety disorder and its severity. But in general, most anxiety disorders are treated with behavioral therapy, medication, or some combination of the two.

### Therapy for anxiety disorders

The following types of therapy can help with issues such as panic attacks, generalized anxiety, and phobias.

**Cognitive-behavior therapy** focuses on thoughts—or cognitions—in addition to behaviors. In anxiety treatment, cognitive-behavioral therapy helps you identify and challenge the negative thinking patterns and irrational beliefs that fuel your anxiety.

**Exposure therapy** for anxiety disorder treatment encourages you to confront your fears in a safe, controlled environment. Through repeated exposures to the feared object or situation, either in your imagination or in reality, you gain a greater sense of control. As you face your fear without being harmed, your anxiety gradually diminishes.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy and exposure therapy are types of behavioral therapy, meaning they focus on behavior rather than on underlying psychological conflicts or issues from the past.

### Medication for anxiety disorders

If you have anxiety that's severe enough to interfere with your ability to function, medication may help relieve your symptoms. However, anxiety medications can be habit forming and cause unwanted side effects, so be sure to research your options. Many people use anti-anxiety medication when therapy, exercise, or self-help strategies would work just as well or better—minus the side effects and safety concerns. It's important to [weigh the benefits and risks of anxiety medication](/articles/anxiety/anxiety-medication.htm) (</articles/anxiety/anxiety-medication.htm>) so you can make an informed decision.

More help for anxiety

[How to Stop Worrying: \(/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm) Self-Help Strategies for Anxiety Relief

[Therapy for Anxiety Disorders: \(/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/therapy-for-anxiety-disorders.htm) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Exposure Therapy, and Other Options

[Anxiety Medication: \(/articles/anxiety/anxiety-medication.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/anxiety-medication.htm) What You Need to Know About Benzodiazepines & Other Anxiety Drugs

[Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder: \(/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorders.htm) Symptoms, Treatment, and Tips for Overcoming Panic

## Resources and references

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