



headspace  
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

# Anxiety



## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is like 'worry'. It's an unpleasant emotion that most people feel when something might be risky, frightening or worrying. Everyone experiences mild anxiety when faced with stressful situations, like just before a sporting match or an exam. This kind of anxiety is normal and is our body's way of preparing us to act in difficult situations. Anxiety can actually help us perform better by revving us up and helping us feel alert.



Anxiety can become a problem when it is very intense, happens a lot of the time, feels overwhelming or it interferes with your daily living.

## What are the symptoms of anxiety?

Physical feelings of anxiety include an increased heart rate, faster breathing, muscle tension, sweating, shaking and 'butterflies in the stomach'. People with anxiety disorders experience these physical symptoms a lot more often. They might also experience:



- Persistent worrying and excessive fears
- Being unable to relax
- Avoiding challenging situations
- Being socially isolated or withdrawn
- Trouble concentrating and paying attention
- Poor sleep
- Problems with work, social or family life.

## What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks can occur as part of any anxiety disorder, but not everyone with anxiety problems will experience them.

Panic attacks are when you are suddenly overcome by strong fear and experience physical symptoms of anxiety, like a pounding heart, difficulty breathing, shaking, feeling dizzy or feeling sick. Panic attacks are short (about 10 minutes) and usually feel frightening and intense. Someone having a panic attack might feel like they're having a heart attack or an asthma attack, or they might fear they're losing control.



# Anxiety



## Types of anxiety disorder

Anxiety problems are classified into different types, referred to as disorders. Here are descriptions of some common anxiety disorders:

- **Generalised anxiety disorder:** Spending most of your time worrying about a variety of everyday things that wouldn't usually bother others. Worries seem out of control and you feel tense and nervous most of the time.
- **Social anxiety disorder:** Experiencing intense anxiety in social situations because you're terrified you'll embarrass yourself or others will judge you. This often leads you to avoid social situations, such as talking in class, going to parties, being the centre of attention, meeting new people.
- **Panic disorder:** Having repeated panic attacks and worrying about having another panic attack.
- **Specific phobias:** Intense fear of a particular situation or object (like small spaces or spiders) that leads you to avoid the situation or object.

## Helping someone with anxiety

A person with anxiety problems needs understanding and support. Anxiety problems can interfere with a person's ability to live a full life so the earlier they seek help the better. Do your best to encourage the person to seek professional help.

Be patient and listen to the person's fears and concerns, and take them seriously. It's not just a matter of telling them to 'calm down'— it's not that easy.



## Other problems



Many young people with anxiety problems may also have symptoms of depression. Some people with anxiety may also drink alcohol or take drugs to ease the discomfort or make them feel more confident. Relying on alcohol or drugs however can make things much worse in the long run and cause long-term physical and mental health problems.

## Getting help for anxiety problems

- If you're experiencing anxiety it's a good idea to talk to someone that you trust about how you are feeling. You might choose to talk with your family or friends. They can help you to work out what is going on and what support or help you might need.
- It is also useful to take care of yourself as best you can; eat well, exercise and find ways to relax by listening to music, meditating, doing yoga and doing activities that you enjoy.
- If your anxiety continues without any improvement you can get help from your general practitioner (GP), a psychologist or a counsellor.
- There are health professionals at **headspace** centres and **eheadspace** (online and phone support) who can help. Treatment might involve counselling sessions to help you learn anxiety management skills, practice relaxation techniques and gain confidence to cope in stressful situations.
- For some people medication is helpful as well. The good news is that most young people with anxiety disorders respond well to treatment. With support you can continue to achieve your work, study, professional or personal goals.



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For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://www.headspace.org.au)