

About Anxiety

## Description

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## About anxiety

Most people experience stress and anxiety at some point in their lives. Generally, stress is usually a response to an external cause, such as a tight deadline at work or having an argument with someone, and usually disappears or reduces once the situation has been resolved.

Anxiety is typically described as a feeling of apprehension or dread in situations where there is no actual real threat and is disproportionate to the situation faced. Unlike stress, anxiety persists even after a concern has passed. In some cases, anxiety can escalate into an anxiety disorder and can affect day-to-day life.

There is a vast difference between being anxious in response to a situation where it would be considered reasonable to be anxious (e.g. taking a driving test, starting a new job etc.) versus experiencing unmanageable and disabling anxiety in response to a situation where you would not expect to have such high levels of anxiety.

### DIY self diagnosis

If you can answer YES to the majority of these questions you may be experiencing anxiety or a phobia:

**Do you feel that you have been nervous most days over the past 6 months?**

**Do you have problems falling asleep?**

**Do you have bad dreams or wake up worrying?**

**Do you feel that your body is very tense or uptight?**

**Do you often feel that you want to shout or feel frustrated?**

*Anxiety UK strongly advises that people seek further information and guidance who will be able to make a formal diagnosis.*

## What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of apprehension or worry about situations in our lives. It is normal for most people to experience short periods of anxiety, for example before an exam or a job interview. But if anxiety stays for long periods of time, is out of proportion to the situation, or affects your day-to-day life in a large way, it can become an anxiety disorder.

We don't fully understand why some people develop anxiety disorders and other don't. We do know there are some things that make an anxiety disorder more likely, such as:

- Being female (most anxiety disorders are more common for girls and women)
- Having a close relative with an anxiety disorder, like a parent.
- Experiencing very stressful or traumatic events like bullying or domestic violence.
- Having problems with alcohol or drugs.
- Having physical health problems, like lung problems or chronic pain.

Other mental health problems can also cause large amounts of anxiety. People who develop depression usually have a low mood and struggle to enjoy things in their life, and they often experience large amounts of anxiety as well.

Penninx BW et al. Anxiety disorders. 2021 397(10277):914-927.

## **Anxiety can cause physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms as follows:**

### **Physical symptoms**

- Butterflies in the stomach feeling
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches and/or dizziness
- Hot flushes
- Increased heartbeat
- Increased perspiration
- Dry mouth
- Tight band across chest area
- Wanting to use the toilet more often
- Feeling sick/shaking
- Loss and/or gain of appetite
- Choking sensation and/or palpitations

### **Psychological symptoms**

- Feeling frightened/panicky

- Fearing you might lose control/go 'mad'/might die
- Fearing you might have a heart attack/brain tumour etc.
- Fearing you might be sick/faint/embarrass yourself
- Fearing people are noticing your anxiety
- Feeling generally as if things are speeding up
- Feeling detached from your environment/the people in it
- Feeling like wanting to run away/escape the situation
- Feeling on edge
- Racing thoughts
- Inability to concentrate
- Finding it hard to make decisions/ feeling indecisive

## Behavioural symptoms

- Taking taxis instead of public transport or walking
- Making excuses to avoid going out with family/friends
- Sitting at the end of a row in theatres or cinemas
- Avoiding going out alone
- Always taking someone with you
- Rushing out of situations where you feel anxious.
- Only shopping when it is quiet
- Using minor roads to avoid busier ones and heavy traffic.
- Crossing the street to avoid people
- Under and/or over – eating due to changes in appetite

## How severe can anxiety get?

Anxiety can be experienced in varying degrees of severity from mild, through to moderate and severe levels. For anxiety to be considered a disorder (i.e. there is a clinical level of anxiety), it is usually experienced as overwhelming and persistent, causing impaired functioning and is disproportionate to the stressor faced. For example, whilst it is usual to experience some level of apprehension and nervousness when encountering new situations such as meeting people, for those, for example, that have social anxiety disorder, the level of anxiety experienced will often be overwhelming, perhaps resulting in the person concerned being unable to attend such events without experiencing significant psychological distress. This could manifest in the form of physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms.

There is a vast difference between being anxious in response to a situation where it would be considered reasonable to be anxious (e.g. taking a driving test, starting a new job etc.) versus experiencing unmanageable and disabling anxiety in response to a situation where you would not expect to have such high levels of anxiety (e.g. going shopping, meeting friends, travelling etc.).

Here are some words and phrases people have used to describe mild/non-clinical versus severe/clinical anxiety:

### Mild

Short lived, proportionate to stressor, manageable, temporary, no/negligible impact on day-to-day life, mild worry, normal emotion.

## **Severe**

Overwhelming, pervasive, disproportionate, feeling on edge all the time, persistent, feeling of dread, interferes with daily activities, excessive worrying, intense, recurrent, intrusive unwanted thoughts, affects ability to work/socialise, intense worry, withdrawal, difficulty concentrating on everyday tasks, can cause suicidal thoughts, debilitating, sustained emotional distress.

## **Treatment and management of anxiety**

The good news is that anxiety is both treatable and manageable. At Anxiety UK, we believe in people being given a choice when it comes to managing their anxiety, as there isn't a 'one-size fits all' approach because anxiety is experienced differently by everyone.

Find out about some of the most common treatment and management options for anxiety in adults:

- [Talking therapies](#)
- [Anxiety management courses and self-help groups](#)
- [Self-management and self-care strategies](#) including [diet](#)
- [Medication](#)

**And finally, this video has some practical tips on managing anxiety:**