

Anxiety disorders - your guide

This guide provides information and advice about anxiety disorders.

It has been produced by psychiatrists – medical doctors who are experts in mental health – with input from consumers and carers. It is based on up-to-date scientific evidence.

This guide is for:

- people who have an anxiety disorder
- people who think they might have an anxiety disorder
- their family and friends.

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Key facts

- It's normal and healthy to feel anxious sometimes. Anxiety actually helps us. It makes us alert and helps us do things well.
- For example, if we are a bit anxious before playing sport or doing an exam, it can make us perform better.
- If we are in danger, feeling anxious can help us escape from the situation.
- However, if we become too anxious, it can stop us thinking clearly.
- When anxiety becomes so overwhelming that it affects your day-to-day life, it becomes a disorder.
- An anxiety disorder is where your anxiety gets out of control and starts to affect your life.
- Anxiety disorders are common.
- Effective treatments for anxiety are available.
- For most people, it's best to start with psychological treatment.

About anxiety disorders

What is an anxiety disorder?

An anxiety disorder is when your anxiety gets out of control and starts to affect your life.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problem in Australia and New Zealand. Around 1 in 3 of us will have an anxiety disorder at some point in our lives.

Having an anxiety disorder can be distressing and make it difficult for you to live your life the way you want.

However, there are effective treatments available and effective ways to prevent anxiety.

Healthy anxiety
Lasts only a short time
Happens in a stressful situation
Feel anxious occasionally
Doesn't affect daily life
Worried about things that could cause problems

Problem anxiety
Lasts for months or years
Not always linked to a stressful situation
Feel anxious often
Stops you doing things
Worried about things that aren't likely to cause problems

Signs and symptoms of anxiety disorders

People with an anxiety disorder have very strong feelings of worry, unease or fear. They are more anxious than most people would be in the same situation.

They may go out of their way to avoid things, people, events or places that make them anxious.

They can also:

- feel panicked
- have trouble breathing
- have a racing heart or chest pain
- feel dizzy, shaky or sick
- blush or sweat
- find it difficult to think clearly and concentrate.

People with anxiety often also have symptoms of depression. If you notice some of these symptoms, and you're concerned you might have an anxiety disorder, you should seek help.

What's a panic attack?

A panic attack is where you suddenly feel extremely fearful. You might have a racing heart, find it hard to breathe, or feel sweaty, dizzy, shaky or like you might vomit.

Some people feel like they might collapse or die. Others feel like they've lost touch with reality.

The attacks come on very quickly, and can be over in just a few minutes. Sometimes they seem to happen for no reason – for example you might be just watching TV or relaxing on the couch.

Panic attacks aren't dangerous, but they are very scary.

Just because you've had one panic attack, it doesn't mean you have an anxiety disorder. But it's worth seeking help if:

- you've had several panic attacks, or
- you're so worried about having another one that it affects how you live your life.

Who gets anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders most often start when people are teenagers.

Anyone can get one, but they are more common among women and girls. They are also more common in people who were neglected/abused as children, or who are neglected/abused as adults. However, you don't need to have suffered trauma to have anxiety.

For some people stress from different sources can build up over time – for example from stressful events at home, work, and in relationships – until the worry and distress develop into an anxiety disorder.

“It’s a terrible feeling. You feel really frightened but you don’t know why. But it’s comforting just to know that what you’re feeling has a name – anxiety.”

Brian, Whangarei

Getting help for anxiety disorders

Is feeling nervous, anxious or worried a problem for you? Does it stop you from doing things you need or want to do?

If you answered yes to both of these questions, it’s worth seeking help. As a first step, see your GP (family doctor).

A GP can assess your symptoms and refer you to see a psychiatrist or psychologist if you need it.

Anxiety disorders don’t usually go away by themselves. But effective treatments are available.

➤ Find out where to get help
yourhealthinmind.org/first

“Once I got help, I was able to deal with stressful situations and I started sleeping better. I’m now able to do so many things that once upon a time I would have avoided.”

Louise, Sydney

Diagnosis of anxiety disorders

A diagnosis is usually made by a GP, psychiatrist or psychologist.

Diagnosis might involve:

- talking to you about how you feel, what’s worrying you, and how long you’ve had these feelings
- tests of your thinking (psychological tests)
- a physical check-up.

Your doctor will want to check that there isn’t another problem making you feel this way (e.g. a heart or thyroid problem), so they may also order other tests.

For most anxiety disorders, you need to have had the symptoms for a few months to get a diagnosis.

Types of anxiety disorders

Generalised anxiety disorder

People with generalised anxiety disorder worry much of the time about all sorts of everyday things – to do with work, finances, health or family for example. They worry something terrible might happen, even if there's no real reason to think so.

They can't stop feeling anxious, even though it's affecting their life.

For example, they might not want to drive a car because they're worried about having an accident.

They often ask for reassurance that the terrible things they fear won't happen.

People with generalised anxiety disorder don't sleep well, and often complain of headaches and muscle tension in their necks and shoulders.

Social anxiety disorder

Someone with social anxiety disorder worries about other people noticing their anxiety and thinking less of them because of it.

- Being the centre of attention is a problem for them.
- For example, they might feel anxious about:
 - meeting new people
 - speaking or performing in front of other people
 - going to meetings or parties
 - catching public transport
 - being watched while eating or drinking.

They worry that they might do something embarrassing, or that other people might notice that they're anxious. They will avoid situations where other people could notice their anxiety.

Normal shyness isn't social anxiety disorder.

Panic disorder

Someone with a panic disorder has repeated panic attacks, which seem to happen for no particular reason, and then they worry a lot about having more panic attacks.

A panic attack is a sudden surge of fear or anxiety in situations where others would not be afraid.

Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is when someone is very fearful about certain situations, because they're afraid that they might have a panic attack, or something awful might happen to them. They then go out of their way to avoid these situations.

Someone with agoraphobia would be very anxious about:

- using buses, trains, trams, or planes
- being in open spaces (car parks, bridges, parks)
- being in enclosed places (shopping centres, cinemas)
- being in a crowd.

Specific phobia

If someone is very fearful of one particular thing or situation, they might have a specific phobia.

People can have phobias about things such as:

- animals – for example spiders or dogs
- flying in aeroplanes
- heights
- getting an injection.

The fear is usually out of proportion to the actual danger, and can cause problems with people's day-to-day lives. For example, someone might refuse to go for a walk in the park because they're worried about dogs.

Problems that are related to anxiety disorders are PTSD and OCD.

“Anxiety creeps in over a long period of time. I think I lived with anxiety for years and years before I knew what it was.”

Louise, Sydney

Treatment of anxiety disorders

How are anxiety disorders treated?

The recommended treatment for anxiety disorders is psychological treatment (usually cognitive behavioural therapy).

If this hasn't worked, or if you have very severe anxiety, your doctor might recommend medication as well.

It's best to try psychological treatments first. They can work just as well as medication. Discuss the options with your doctor.

What can a psychiatrist do for anxiety disorders?

Psychiatrists can:

- talk with you about your concerns
 - make a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder
 - work out a way to manage your anxiety
 - provide treatments – such as psychological treatments or medication
 - diagnose and treat any other mental health issues, including depression or alcohol and drug use
 - keep track of any medication side effects and your physical health
 - talk with people close to you about anxiety, if you wish
 - provide referrals to other health professionals, including psychologists.
- Find a psychiatrist near you who has an interest in anxiety disorders.
yourhealthinmind.org/find
- Finding the right psychiatrist for you
yourhealthinmind.org/right

Psychological treatment

The best type of psychological treatment for anxiety disorders is cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT).

When you do CBT you will start by learning about healthy anxiety and the way our brains handle anxiety. Then you will learn how to challenge your unhelpful thoughts and control your anxious thoughts and behaviours.

If the treatment is working you should see an improvement in 4–8 weeks.

Face-to-face CBT

You can do CBT face-to-face with a qualified therapist – usually a psychologist or psychiatrist. Around 8–12 sessions are recommended.

- More about psychological treatments.
yourhealthinmind.org/psychological

Online CBT

You can get self-guided CBT online. It can be low cost or even free, and you can do it where and when suits you. Online CBT from these websites has been shown to work well for anxiety:

- This Way Up (Australia; free and paid)
thiswayup.org.au
- MindSpot (Australia; free)
mindspot.org.au
- Mental Health Online (Australia; free and paid).
mentalhealthonline.org.au

Exposure therapy

Exposure therapy is sometimes part of CBT. It's where you gradually confront a situation that makes you anxious.

First, you make a list of all the things you'd like to do, but currently can't. Then you start by doing the easiest thing, and gradually work your way up to the hardest.

For example, if you are anxious about train travel, your list might look like this:

1. Spend some time on the train platform.
2. Travel one stop with a friend.
3. Travel one stop alone.
4. Travel to the city alone at a quiet time.
5. Travel to the city alone at a busy time.

Medication

In general, you should only be treated with medication if psychological treatments haven't worked.

However, if you have a severe anxiety disorder or severe depression, your doctor will probably recommend both medication and psychological treatment from the start.

Types of medications used for anxiety

The best medications for anxiety disorders are antidepressants. Antidepressants work well for anxiety as well as depression.

The antidepressants most often used to treat anxiety

are the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Examples are fluoxetine and citalopram.

SSRIs aren't suitable for some people, so your doctor might recommend a different type of antidepressant instead – a serotonin and noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI). Examples are venlafaxine and duloxetine. In some cases, your doctor might recommend other antidepressants.

Benzodiazepines (also called sleeping pills) are sometimes used to treat anxiety, but they are no longer recommended as an initial treatment. This is because they're addictive, and their effects don't last long.

➤ More about antidepressant medications
yourhealthinmind.org/antidepressants

Self-care for anxiety disorders

Feeling anxious right now?

If you are feeling too anxious to concentrate, try this slow breathing technique.

1. Hold your breath for 5 seconds.
2. Breathe in for 3 seconds.
3. Breathe out for 3 seconds.
4. Keep doing these slow breaths in and out for 1 minute.
5. Repeat for another minute. Stop when your anxiety lessens.

Learn how to control anxiety whenever you experience it. Here are some things that have worked for other people with anxiety.

- Use proven techniques to help you calm down, such as slow breathing, mindfulness or relaxation.
- Think carefully about how realistic your worries are. How likely is it that the thing you're afraid of will happen? Or if you're telling yourself you 'must' do something, is this really true?
- Try to distract yourself by doing something you enjoy. For example, have an in-depth conversation with someone, read a book, take time out with a pet, go for a walk, or do some gardening.
- Do you have a practical problem that you might be able to do something about? Try brainstorming to

come up with some solutions and make a plan to put the best solution into action. Even just going through the problem-solving process can make you feel calmer.

- Are you feeling anxious about not having done something you know you should do? Try taking a small step toward doing that thing. It doesn't matter how small – for example, if you're anxious about tidying the house, start with some dusting.

To manage your anxiety in the long term:

- Gradually learn to confront the things you're anxious about. Start with the least scary, and move up to the things you worry most about.
- Learn about anxiety and teach others about what you're going through.
- Join a support group in person or online.
- Try to get at least 30 minutes of exercise every day. Exercising changes your brain chemicals and can help to reduce anxiety.
- Spend time with friends and family whose company makes you happy, particularly people who manage stress well.
- Be aware of the signs of depression. Many people with anxiety disorders also have depression.
- Are you dealing with your anxiety by drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs? This can cause even more problems. Talk to your doctor if you're having trouble cutting down.

- Smoking and caffeine can make your anxiety worse. If you smoke, try to quit. Try to cut down on coffee, tea, cola and other food and drinks that contain caffeine.

Recovery from anxiety disorders

With the right support, information and treatment, most people with anxiety disorders improve. Many will recover completely and stay well.

Often people find it easier to manage their anxiety as they get older.

The right treatment can help you get to a place where your anxiety doesn't control your life any more, and you can do the things you want and need to do.

Helping someone with an anxiety disorder

- Learn about anxiety and anxiety disorders.
- Support the person's decision to seek treatment, if that's what they want to do.
- Make time to exercise together.
- Be encouraging and understanding. Ask them if they want to talk and how you can help. Listen with sympathy and try to work out exactly what they're anxious about. Even if they're not ready to talk about it, just having someone try to understand can be helpful.
- If you're offering advice, be sensitive to their feelings. The same applies if you're trying to explain why you think their fears aren't realistic or making suggestions about solving a problem.
- It's not helpful to tell someone with anxiety to relax or snap out of it.

Support

- ✦ [beyondblue \(Australia\)](http://beyondblue.org.au)
beyondblue.org.au
- ✦ [Anxiety New Zealand Trust](http://anxiety.org.nz)
anxiety.org.nz

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

Published April 2017 © RANZCP | C1025V1

About us

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health. The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.