



the facts:
mental health challenges



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

understanding anxiety

What is anxiety?

It's more than feeling stressed or worried.

Anxiety is something that we all experience from time to time. It's our body's way of preparing us to face challenging situations.

Sometimes anxiety can help us perform better by helping us feel alert and motivated.

Anxiety can come and go – but for some people, it can stick around for a long time, or occur in situations where you wouldn't normally expect to feel anxious. This can end up having a big impact on their daily lives.

When this happens, it might be time to do something about it.

Signs and symptoms

Everyone experiences anxiety differently, but there are some common signs and symptoms.

Physical signs can include:

- racing heart
- faster breathing
- feeling tense or having aches (especially neck, shoulders and back)
- sweating or feeling dizzy
- shaking
- 'butterflies' or feeling sick in the stomach.

Thoughts can include:

- worrying about things a lot of the time
- feeling like your worries are out of control
- having trouble concentrating and paying attention
- worries that seem out of proportion.

Other signs can include:

- being unable to relax
- avoiding people or places like school, uni or TAFE or parties and socialising
- withdrawing from family and friends
- feeling annoyed, irritated or restless
- difficulty getting to sleep at night or waking up a lot during the night.

Common types of anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders involve more than temporary worries or fears. People can experience different types of anxiety disorders, but it's important to know that they can all be treated.

Generalised anxiety disorder

Some people may worry, and feel their worries are out of control about many areas of life (i.e., work, studies, health). They might feel tense and nervous most of the time, have trouble sleeping or find it hard to concentrate.

Social anxiety disorder

Some people may experience intense anxiety in social situations because of fear of embarrassment or judgement. This may lead to avoiding situations where there are other people.

Separation anxiety disorder

Some people experience intense fear about being away from loved ones or worry about them being hurt.

Agoraphobia

Some people feel intense anxiety about being in particular environments outside the home. This can include public spaces, public transport, enclosed spaces or crowds.

Specific phobias

Some people may experience a fear of a particular situation or object – like spiders or animals – that leads to a person avoiding that situation or object.

Panic disorder

Some people experience repeated panic attacks and ongoing fears about having more panic attacks.



Anxiety and depression

Many young people experiencing an anxiety disorder may also experience symptoms of depression. This can make things much more confusing. If you think this is happening for you, it's important to reach out for support.

What can I do to manage anxiety?

There are things you can try to help manage your anxiety so that it doesn't get in the way of your daily life.

Care for yourself

Managing anxiety starts with good self-care. Try to eat well, get enough sleep and stay active to help your overall mental health and wellbeing.

Talk about it

It's a good idea to talk about how you're feeling – whether it's with a trusted family member, friends, a teacher, coach, your mob or Elders. They can support you, help you understand what's going on, help you stick to your self-care goals and get extra help if needed.

Notice your thinking patterns

Being aware of how your thoughts can influence your anxiety is an important step towards managing it. It can help you understand what contributes to your anxiety and what your triggers are. This can help you to handle them differently and learn new ways to respond.

Be aware of avoidance

It's normal to want to avoid situations that make you feel anxious. It might work in the short-term, but over time it can make your anxiety feel worse. This is because you don't get the opportunity to learn that the thing you fear may not happen or be as bad as you think.

Learn some skills to cope with anxiety, like helpful self-talk and relaxation, then gradually face the things you fear and put your skills into action. As you realise you can manage anxious situations, you'll become more confident and motivated to keep going.

Try new breathing strategies

Lots of anxiety symptoms involve a cycle of physical sensations – pounding heart, shortness of breath, trembling and butterflies in the stomach. Working on slowing your breathing is a good way to try to interrupt that cycle. There are many apps that can help with this.

Limit your use of alcohol and other drugs

While alcohol and other drugs might help you to feel good in the short term, they can make you feel much worse in the longer term.

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks can occur as part of any anxiety disorder, but not everyone will experience them. They are sudden rushes of intense anxiety or fear, together with frightening thoughts (e.g., 'I'm going to die', 'I can't breathe') and feelings (e.g., pounding heart, difficulty breathing).

Panic attacks can feel overwhelming, and usually last about 10 minutes. It's important to know these feelings pass.

Getting support

There are plenty of ways to manage your anxiety so that it doesn't get in the way of your daily life.

Check out the headspace website for tips on how to look after your mental health and to learn more about anxiety.

If you've tried some of these strategies for some time without improving despite your efforts, it's time to reach out to a trusted friend, family member, Elder, teacher, counsellor, or a health service.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school, TAFE or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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