

Anxiety Disorder

Anxiety is a normal and inevitable part of human experience. We all know what it feels like to be nervous - even extremely anxious - about a big date, exam, job interview, important speech, or some other life event. A certain amount of anxiety is helpful as it provides energy, excitement, and focus for the task. However, in a significant proportion of people anxiety can become incessant, extreme, and out of proportion to the situation, despite the person's best efforts to stay calm. When anxiety interferes significantly with a person's life or wellbeing it is often referred to as an **anxiety disorder**.

Common anxiety-related problems and types of anxiety disorder include:

- Social anxiety including fear of public speaking
- Excessive worry
- Panic attacks
- Posttraumatic reactions
- Fears and phobias
- Generalised anxiety disorders
- Obsessions and compulsions

If anxiety gets out of hand, it can interfere with enjoying life and reaching your potential. An anxiety disorder can hold you back at work, stop you doing things you'd like to do, interfere with social and family relationships, and undermine confidence and self esteem. People often become quite depressed about feeling excessively anxious, which only makes their situation more stressful, isolating, and difficult.

The good news is that anxiety disorder is treatable. A substantial amount of research in the last few decades has focussed on understanding and treating anxiety and anxiety disorders. This has given us a good understanding of what underlies various different anxiety conditions, and what helps to overcome them.

Unfortunately, many of the things that people do to reduce their anxiety in the short term may exacerbate their anxiety in the long term. Evidence-based treatments for anxiety and anxiety disorder seek to break this cycle, by helping you to understand what really drives your anxiety, and teaching you skills and strategies to cultivate normal levels of anxiety for the long run.

Research over the last few decades has substantially advanced understanding and treatment of anxiety disorders.

What is an Anxiety Disorder?

The anxiety that people experience as part of an anxiety disorder is no different to "normal" anxiety except that it is more intense, frequent, and easily activated, sometimes to the point of overwhelming distress and panic. The point at which anxiety is considered a "disorder" is somewhat arbitrary. It really depends on the degree to which anxiety is interfering in a person's life and/or causing them to suffer. The main point is that if your anxiety stops you from doing important things that you would like to do, causes you considerable distress, or interferes with your ability to function socially, academically, personally, or at work, then you are suffering more than you need to as a result of your anxiety.

Social anxiety & social phobia

Almost everyone feels nervous now and then in social situations, such as when giving a speech or at job interviews. For most people this anxiety passes fairly quickly and causes little disruption or distress. But when social anxiety is persistent, intense and distressing, and/or causes people to avoid particular social activities, it is classified as a phobia.

People with social phobia tend to feel fearful meeting new people or when they might be observed or evaluated. They are often concerned that they will embarrass or humiliate themselves, or that others will think

badly of them. They may fear a wide range of social interactions, or just specific situations, such as public speaking. Common fears for people with social phobia include:

"I won't know what to say / my mind will go blank"

"I won't be funny / interesting / knowledgeable enough"

"I'll say something wrong"

"Everyone will see how anxious I am and think I'm pathetic"

"They'll think I'm strange or stupid"

Social anxiety can be accompanied by strong physiological symptoms of anxiety such as trembling, blushing, sweating, a shaky voice, or a pounding heart. To keep control of themselves, people who experience strong social anxiety often try to avoid the situations that trigger their anxiety reactions. Situations commonly avoided by sufferers of social phobia include:

- Parties
- Public speaking
- Contributing to meetings, discussions, or classes
- Making conversation, either one on one or in groups
- Meeting new people
- Dating
- Being assertive
- Being out in public, e.g. at shopping centres or in crowds

Social avoidance can interfere with career progress, making friends, enjoying work and social life, having intimate relationships, and getting to know people. Evidence-based treatment can help sufferers to reduce their anxiety, and to ultimately take part in the activities they fear.

Fears and phobias

While many of us dislike spiders, heights, or injections, a fear becomes a phobia when it causes substantial distress and/or interferes with a person's life. Sometimes phobias stop people from doing things that are important to them, or create significant inconvenience and stress. Someone with a driving phobia, for instance, may avoid driving, and as a result may be restricted in the kinds of work or leisure that they can pursue. Common varieties of phobias include fears of:

- Animals or insects
- Storms
- Heights
- Water or swimming
- Injections and/or the sight of blood
- Enclosed spaces such as lifts
- Driving
- Flying
- Bridges or tunnels

Specific phobias such as these can be treated so that the person is able to face the situations they fear, with increasingly less distress and anxiety.

Excessive worry: Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Like social anxiety, a certain amount of worry is normal and useful. If we worry about a possible future event it can help us to prepare for it. However, in some people worry gets out of hand. When this happens, people spend a substantial proportion of their time worrying, without ever really resolving the issues they are worrying about. Despite trying hard to stop the worry, people find that it recurs incessantly, and becomes very difficult to control. The kinds of issues people tend to worry about are:

- Work and/or school
- Health
- Finances
- Minor matters such as punctuality
- Safety, including terrorism, car accidents, plane crashes etc
- Social and interpersonal issues

These worries typically involve persistent "what if?" thoughts, such as:

"What if I mess this up?"

"What if I fail this exam / get the sack?"

"What if I get a fatal disease?"

"What if my children / parents get ill / have an accident?"

"What if I can't keep up the mortgage payments?"

The anxiety associated with such worries often creates ongoing feelings of tension, agitation, irritability, fatigue, sleep disturbance, and/or difficulty concentrating. Sometimes the worrying thoughts can be so persistent that they interfere with productivity and performance at work or school, and get in the way of enjoying everyday life.

People often deal with their worries by seeking reassurance, such as calling family members to see if they are OK, or by trying to do things perfectly, such as working excessively on projects to eliminate possible mistakes. People also often avoid worry triggers, such as activities that they perceive as risky or things that set their worry in train. This avoidance can lead to procrastination, such as procrastinating on work tasks, or procrastinating about going to the doctor or dealing with issues such as paying bills.

With effective treatment, people can reduce their worrying to more manageable and normal levels, and reduce its impact on their lives.

How Is GAD Treated?

If no physical illness is found, you may be referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist, mental health professionals who are specially trained to diagnose and treat mental illnesses like GAD. Treatment for GAD most often includes a combination of medication and cognitive-behavioural therapy.

- **Medication:** Drugs are available to treat GAD and may be especially helpful for people whose anxiety is interfering with daily functioning. The medications most often used to treat GAD in the short-term are from a class of drugs called benzodiazepines. These medications are sometimes referred to as "tranquilizers," because they leave you feeling calm and relaxed. They work by decreasing the physical symptoms of GAD, such as muscle tension and restlessness. Common benzodiazepines include Xanax, Librium, Valium and Ativan. Antidepressants, such as Paxil, Effexor, Prozac, Lexapro, and Zoloft, are also being used to treat GAD. These antidepressants may take a few weeks to start working but they're more appropriate for long-term treatment of GAD.

What Are the Symptoms of GAD?

GAD affects the way a person thinks, but the anxiety can lead to physical symptoms, as well. Symptoms of GAD can include:

- Excessive, ongoing worry and tension
- An unrealistic view of problems
- Restlessness or a feeling of being "edgy"
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Sweating
- Difficulty concentrating
- Nausea
- The need to go to the bathroom frequently
- Tiredness
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Trembling
- Being easily startled

In addition, people with GAD often have other anxiety disorders (such as panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and phobias), suffer from depression, and/or abuse drugs or alcohol.

What Causes GAD?

The exact cause of GAD is not fully known, but a number of factors -- including genetics, brain chemistry and environmental stresses -- appear to contribute to its development.

- **Genetics:** Some research suggests that family history plays a part in increasing the likelihood that a person will develop GAD. This means that the tendency to develop GAD may be passed on in families.
- **Brain chemistry:** GAD has been associated with abnormal levels of certain neurotransmitters in the brain. Neurotransmitters are special chemical messengers that help move information from nerve cell to nerve cell. If the neurotransmitters are out of balance, messages cannot get through the brain properly. This can alter the way the brain reacts in certain situations, leading to anxiety.
- **Environmental factors:** Trauma and stressful events, such as abuse, the death of a loved one, divorce, changing jobs or schools, may lead to GAD. GAD also may become worse during periods of stress. The use of and withdrawal from addictive substances, including alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine, can also worsen anxiety.

How Common Is GAD?

About 1 million adults in Australia suffer from GAD during the course of a year. It most often begins in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood. It is more common in women than in men.