

Understanding and Managing Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a term often used to describe feelings of worry and fear, typically, incorporating both emotional and physical sensations. Feelings of fear, anxiety, or stress related to the 'fight or flight' response, while unpleasant, are normal reactions when our body perceives a threat. However, **anxiety disorders** can interfere with your ability to work, enjoy life, or form close relationships.

The key to coping with these conditions is to realize that they usually do not go away on their own. But getting the right kind of help can enable you to overcome an anxiety disorder or to find ways to deal confidently with it.



What Are Some Common Kinds of Anxiety Disorders?

It's very common to feel tense or unsure about a potentially stressful situation, such as an exam or starting a new job with some of us affected more than others. However, if these feelings are very intense or are long-lasting, it may be an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders can take many forms.

According to the major clinical diagnostic references (DSM and ICD), anxiety disorders fall into these broad groups:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). People with generalized anxiety disorder feel anxious or nervous most of the time. Some worry excessively about their work, school performance, families, health, or finances. Others can't identify a specific cause for their anxiety. They may feel tense, exhausted, nauseated, irritable, unable to concentrate, lightheaded and out of breath, a sense of dread, racing thoughts, "on edge," or over-worrying about scenarios. They may perspire more than others, or they may have sleep disturbance, headaches, muscle tension, or digestive issues. Their symptoms last for at least six months and without treatment may persist for much longer. Everyone will experience symptoms differently and the severity may cause you to avoid certain situations, withdraw from family and friends, and find work difficult. These actions can cause further worry and low self-esteem.

Panic Disorder. Panic disorder involves sudden and repeated episodes of terror that strike without warning. Most panic attacks last between 5-20 minutes, but some have been reported to last for up to an hour. Even brief panic attacks can arrive so unexpectedly that people may worry intensely about when the next one will occur and may start avoiding certain situations. The episodes may involve palpitations or pounding heart, feelings of dread, trembling, shaking, sweating, or having hot flashes. Or they may cause people to feel dizzy, numb, flushed, chilled, or lightheaded. Sometimes people who are having a panic attack feel that they are dying, unable to breathe, or having a heart attack or stroke. Or they may think that they are losing their minds or that the world is spinning out of control.

Often events, situations, or things that set off a panic attack can be identified, but sometimes the triggers are hard to pinpoint. Due to the intensity of these panic attack symptoms—particularly the feelings of fear and terror—many people with panic disorder are unable to relax between attacks. Constantly worrying about when another attack will occur creates a cycle of living in

'fear of fear' which reinforces panic and anxiety. The emotional toll of this anticipatory anxiety can negatively impact self-confidence and may greatly disrupt a person's ability to function normally on a day-to-day basis.

Phobias. Phobias are intense fears of objects or situations that are usually relatively safe, such as heights, thunderstorms, tunnels or bridges, dogs or snakes, flying, or driving a car. People who have these phobias know their fears are irrational, but they still feel very afraid when they encounter these things and avoid them when possible. The symptoms of phobias tend to be very similar to those experienced during a panic attack

There are a wide variety of objects or situations that someone could develop a phobia about. However, phobias can be divided into two main categories:

- Specific or simple phobias, which center around a particular object, animal, situation, or activity.
- Complex phobias, which tend to be disabling and are the most common as agoraphobia and social phobia (social anxiety).

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Also known as social phobia, social anxiety disorder is the fear of being humiliated, embarrassed in front of others and judged by them. It tends to cause difficulties in specific kinds of social situations. People with this disorder may feel painfully self-conscious or see minor mistakes as major problems. They may be afraid to attend parties, speak in public, eat in restaurants, talk on the phone or write in front of others.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Marked by intrusive thoughts—for example, an irrational fear of germs or self-harm, fixation on orderliness, or mental images of a violent nature—or repetitive behaviors—such as, excessive handwashing, constant checking and rechecking of doors and light switches, and hoarding— or both. These thoughts and acts are persistent, recurrent, and unpleasant. The person experiencing this realizes that these obsessions and compulsions, while meant to ease anxiety or prevent a feared event, are unrealistic and in fact cause a great deal of distress.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). When someone has experienced or witnessed a traumatic event—natural disaster, industrial accident, act of war, robbery, sexual assault, or abuse—a person's response to the event can often involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror. If the trauma is severe, sustained, or if there is little or no support to recover from the trauma, PTSD can occur. Symptoms may include persistent and intrusive reliving of the event, numbing of emotions, withdrawal from social interactions, and increased agitation or level of alertness. Rather than diminishing with time, those experiencing PTSD report an increase in frequency and intensity of symptoms.

What Treatments Are Available?

Anxiety disorders are usually treated with therapy, medication, or both. The treatment may include these therapies:

Behavioral therapy helps you learn techniques for stopping or controlling unwanted behaviors. These techniques may include deep breathing for panic attacks and exposure therapy, or desensitization, for phobias.

Exposure therapy provides a safe space where people are gradually and systematically exposed to the objects or situations that frighten them. They also are helped to develop coping skills. For example, people who fear dogs might first view dogs in pictures and then go to see them in a relatively safe setting, such as a pet shop or kennel, before trying to face dogs on a leash.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps by challenging your negative and anxious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to help you understand how they affect each other, and how you avoid situations. For example, people who worry about giving speeches might learn to identify and question the self-defeating negative messages they send themselves before presentations and to replace them with more realistic positive ones. Instead of thinking, "I always mess up when I speak in front of a large crowd and people judge me" they might think, "I am prepared for my speech and know my audience well. My topic is interesting to this group of people."

Medications may be used along with other forms of therapy. For long-term treatment, doctors may prescribe selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs also known as anti-depressants), which act on the parts of the brain that regulate anxiety. Other medications, such as benzodiazepines (also known as tranquilizers), act on the central nervous system by slowing it down and have an immediate effect on lowering anxiety. These medications are prescribed only for short periods of time because there is a risk of addiction. It can be important to control panic attacks with medication so that they do not become more frequent or intense, making it harder to manage them. Beta blockers are a type of medication that treats high blood pressure and heart issues. However, doctors may prescribe them (most commonly propranolol) to help reduce the "fight or flight" stress hormone, which would control the physical symptoms of anxiety. Other options include serotonin-noradrenaline reuptake inhibitors (SNRI), tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs), and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs).

It is important to realize that these medications may take weeks to have full effect, and it might take time to find the best dose or medication for you. Additionally, taking medication is an individual choice and it's important to speak openly to your doctor about any concerns you have about them and be aware of the side effects.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a treatment for anxiety disorders that typically requires a limited number of sessions, making the treatment very cost-effective. EMDR therapist may ask their clients to focus on the most painful memories they have that provoke their anxiety and hold these in their minds, paying particular attention to sensations, images and emotions that arise. This allows the therapist to help guide your attention away from the negative thoughts and towards more positive ones, softening the anxiety.

Some anxiety disorders may respond well to a single form of treatment while others may require a combination of medication and therapy. Depending on the nature of the condition, people may see progress in a relatively short time, such as six to eight weeks, or may need to continue the therapy for much longer.

Dealing with Anxiety Disorders

Because anxiety disorders make life more stressful, people who have them may benefit from reducing the level of tension in their everyday lives. Here are some tips:

First, see your doctor. Your first step should be to have an initial physical exam, including lab studies. Many symptoms of anxiety disorder are similar to other medical conditions, so it's best to rule these out first. Then, proceed with a consultation to address your mental health concerns.

Eat a balanced diet. Some people with anxiety disorders benefit from eating a healthier diet, taking vitamins, limiting sugar intake and eliminating caffeine, chocolate and nicotine.

Get physical activity. Regular exercise is one of the most effective ways to cope with anxiety. It can make you feel calmer and help you substitute healthy rituals for unhealthy behavior patterns. Exercising in the morning or afternoon may help improve problems with sleep disturbance associated with some disorders.

Find ways to relax. You can start with simply doing things you enjoy like listening to music or walking in nature. You can also try easy techniques to reduce stress like progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, and yoga stretches. All these approaches will help relax your body and improve your well-being.

Take up meditation or mindfulness. Meditation and other forms of mindfulness can help to lower blood pressure and a too-rapid heartbeat. Mindfulness works by focusing your awareness on the present moment and “saying hello” or acknowledging your emotions that are there. This can reduce anxiety by allowing you to feel the anxiety, creating space for it, and gradually quietening your racing thoughts and worries without judgment.

Use visualization. Visualizing a positive outcome or calm and peaceful scene may make you feel less tense and more in control. It may help to hang a picture of a soothing place, such as a beach or a forest, in a spot where you will see it frequently. If you tend to feel anxious at work, you might put such a picture in your desk drawer and look at it before facing a stressful situation.

Try to distract yourself. You may be able to distract yourself from some kinds of anxiety by repeating a positive word or phrase or a short poem or prayer. You might also try to redirect your focus by counting backward or forward, snapping a rubber band lightly against your wrist, or chewing gum.

Learn about your condition. Staying up to date on research and treatment methods can provide ideas for techniques that might help or alert you to subjects to bring up with a doctor or therapist. Self-help resources, such as the National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus website, can be good tools to develop your own self-awareness of your emotions and help you make sense out of it.

Try reassuring yourself by telling yourself you are feeling anxiety, but it will not hurt you and isn't dangerous, and that it will pass. This reassurance can help make you feel calmer and less fearful of future attacks.

Join a support group. Engaging with others who are having the same experience as you can be helpful. It can be comforting to know you are not alone and there are others who are facing similar challenges. Sharing your experiences can help develop your own ways of coping and add more to your “toolkit.”

Contact the Caterpillar Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Caterpillar's global EAP is a free, voluntary and completely confidential service provided to employees and their eligible family members to help meet many challenges—including anxiety disorders—at home and work. The EAP is also a referral source for those in need - supervisory, peer or family member referrals. The goal of the EAP is to assess your needs, provide short-term services to help resolve personal problems, and then provide information and referrals for specialized or longer-term services if needed.

The EAP is available in 47 languages and includes 24/7 access online, by phone, and via the LifeWorks app. Many Caterpillar locations also offer onsite services. For access in North America or general support, call **+1-866-CAT(228)-0565**. More information as well as global helplines can be found at [CaterpillarEAP.com](https://www.caterpillar.com/eap).

Anxiety disorders do not usually stop on their own. But with help from a professional you can begin to learn new ways to manage symptoms and enjoy life again without the fear and dread that anxiety can cause.

© LifeWorks 2022
Shantiva Worles, MSSA
Last Reviewed Jun 2022

 LifeWorks

 Total health

 CATERPILLAR®