

ANXIETY DISORDERS AND ANXIETY ATTACKS

Recognising the signs and symptoms, and getting help

It's normal to feel anxious when facing a challenging situation, such as a job interview, a tough exam, or a blind date. But if your worries and fears are preventing you from living your life the way you'd like to, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder. There are many different types of anxiety disorders—as well as many effective treatments and self-help strategies. Once you understand your anxiety disorder, there are steps you can take to reduce your symptoms and regain control of your life.

When does anxiety become a disorder?

Anxiety is the body's natural response to danger, an automatic alarm that goes off when you feel threatened, under pressure, or are facing a stressful situation. In moderation, anxiety isn't always a bad thing. In fact, anxiety can help you stay alert and focused, spur you to action, and motivate you to solve problems. But when anxiety is constant or overwhelming—when it interferes with your relationships and activities—that's when you've crossed the line from normal anxiety into the territory of anxiety disorders.

Do you have an anxiety disorder?

If you identify with any of the following seven signs and symptoms, and they just won't go away, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder:

1. Are you constantly tense, worried, or on edge?
2. Does your anxiety interfere with your work or family responsibilities?
3. Are you plagued by fears that you know are irrational, but can't shake?
4. Do you believe that something bad will happen if certain things aren't done a certain way?
5. Do you avoid everyday situations or activities because they cause you anxiety?
6. Do you experience sudden, unexpected attacks of heart-pounding panic?
7. Do you feel like danger and catastrophe are around every corner?

Signs and symptoms of anxiety disorders

Because anxiety disorders are a group of related conditions rather than a single disorder, they can look very different from person to person. One individual may suffer from intense anxiety attacks that strike without warning, while another gets panicky at the thought of mingling at a party. Someone else may struggle with a disabling fear of driving, or uncontrollable, intrusive thoughts. Yet another may live in a constant state of tension, worrying about anything and everything.

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But despite their different forms, all anxiety disorders share one major symptom: persistent or severe fear or worry in situations where most people wouldn't feel threatened.

Emotional symptoms of anxiety

In addition to the primary anxiety symptoms of irrational and excessive fear and worry, other common emotional symptoms include:

- Feelings of apprehension or dread
- Watching for signs of danger
- Anticipating the worst
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling tense and jumpy
- Irritability
- Feeling like your mind's gone blank

Physical symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety is more than just a feeling. As a product of the body's fight-or-flight response, anxiety involves a wide range of physical symptoms. Because of the numerous physical symptoms, anxiety sufferers often mistake their disorder for a medical illness. They may visit many doctors and make numerous trips to the hospital before their anxiety disorder is discovered.

Common physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Headaches
- Stomach upset
- Dizziness
- Frequent urination or diarrhoea
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle tension or twitches
- Shaking or trembling
- Insomnia

Anxiety attacks and their symptoms

Anxiety attacks, also known as panic attacks, are episodes of intense panic or fear. Anxiety attacks usually occur suddenly and without warning. Sometimes there's an obvious trigger—getting stuck in an elevator, for example, or thinking about the big speech you have to give—but in other cases, the attacks come out of the blue.

Anxiety attacks usually peak within 10 minutes, and they rarely last more than 30 minutes. But during that short time, the terror can be so severe that you feel as if you're about to die or totally lose control.

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The physical symptoms of anxiety attacks are themselves so frightening that many people believe they're having a heart attack. After an anxiety attack is over, you may be worried about having another one, particularly in a public place where help isn't available or you can't easily escape.

- Surge of overwhelming panic
- Feeling of losing control or going crazy
- Heart palpitations or chest pain
- Feeling like you're going to pass out
- Trouble breathing or choking sensation
- Hyperventilation
- Hot flashes or chills
- Trembling or shaking
- Nausea or stomach cramps
- Feeling detached or unreal

It is important to seek help if you're starting to avoid certain situations or places because you're afraid of having a panic attack. The good news is that panic attacks are highly treatable. In fact, many people are panic free within just five to eight treatment sessions.