

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are some of the most common forms of mental illness. They're also highly treatable. This handout can help you understand these disorders and the options for treatment.



What are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety is a normal part of life. But anxiety disorders are different from everyday worries. They're chronic medical disorders that bring severe and irrational worry, tension, fear, or dread. And without treatment, they can grow to overwhelm every aspect of daily life.

Anxiety disorders include these common types:

- Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Panic disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Social anxiety disorder (SAD, also called social phobia)

Each of these disorders has its own distinct features, which are described on the next page. But they are bound together by a common fact: they are all highly treatable. So if you're one of the many people suffering from an anxiety disorder today, take heart. You can be optimistic about finding relief. With good care, you can overcome your anxiety disorder—and live a healthier, fuller life.

Anxiety disorders are...

Real. They're medical conditions that affect more than 19 million Americans.

Serious. Anxiety disorders can bring severe symptoms. For some people, symptoms make normal life nearly impossible.

Treatable. With good care, most people with anxiety disorders can overcome them.

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What are the common symptoms of anxiety disorders?

Different anxiety disorders have different patterns of symptoms.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

People with GAD feel a steady tension that they can't control. They may worry constantly, even when there is no apparent reason. Tension and worry can cause these symptoms:

- Restlessness or feeling “on edge”
- Fatigue and trouble concentrating
- Headaches and muscle tension
- Trembling, sweating, and hot flashes
- Feeling dizzy or out of breath
- Trouble falling or staying asleep

GAD interferes with daily activity. In the worst cases, it makes normal life impossible.

“I worry about everything and nothing—and I can never really seem to relax. I have a lot of trouble sleeping, too. Sometimes I can barely drag myself in to work.”

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)

People with OCD suffer from one or both of the following symptoms:

- Persistent, unwelcome thoughts (**obsessions**)
- Urgent need to repeat certain ritual behaviors (**compulsions**)

People with OCD realize that their thoughts and impulses aren't normal. They try to ignore or suppress them. They may try to hide them from other people. But in spite of their efforts, they remain in the grip of their obsessions and compulsions. Eventually, the thoughts and actions that stem from OCD can overwhelm daily life.

I know these routines—the double checking, the counting—aren't normal. But I can't stop them. And now they're taking over my whole life.

Panic disorder

The core symptom of panic disorder is the **panic attack**. A panic attack is a sudden and overwhelming fear. It can occur seemingly without reason, and can bring on extreme emotions and physical signs, such as:

- Pounding heart, chest pain, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, dizziness
- Feeling unreal or disconnected, fear of having a heart attack or “going crazy”

For some people, a panic attack is a one-time event. But people with **panic disorder** have had 2 or more attacks—and constantly fear another.

They come out of the blue—these surges of fear. My heart pounds like I've run a mile, and I start shaking.... I dread knowing it could happen again.

What causes anxiety disorders?

Scientists believe that many factors may combine to cause anxiety disorders. Here are a few of the most likely:

- **Brain chemistry.** Brain chemistry is almost certainly a factor in anxiety disorders. How do we know? Symptoms are often relieved by medications that alter levels of chemicals in the brain.
- **Life experiences.** Exposure to abuse, violence, or poverty may make you more vulnerable to these illnesses.
- **Family history (genetics).** Studies show that anxiety disorders run in families. This is probably due mostly to genetics. Identical twins are more likely to share an anxiety disorder than twins who are not identical.
- **Learned behaviors and thinking patterns.** People with low self-esteem and poor coping skills may be prone to anxiety disorders.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD may happen to someone who has survived a trauma such as war, rape, abuse, or violent crime.

People with PTSD have persistent frightening thoughts and memories of their earlier ordeals. They may be depressed. They may feel emotionally numb, especially toward people they were once close to. They may feel irritable, and be more aggressive than they used to be. In severe cases, people with PTSD may have trouble working or socializing.



They said that time would heal me. Not in my case. I try not to think or talk about it, but the memory floods over me nearly every day.



Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD, also called Social Phobia)

People with SAD feel overwhelming anxiety in everyday social situations. They have a chronic, intense fear of being judged by others—and being embarrassed by their own actions.

For some people, anxiety is linked to one type of situation, such as public speaking. For others, the fear is far more broad, and causes symptoms almost any time they're around others. Many people with this illness have a hard time making and keeping friends.



Talking with anyone except my family was nerve-racking. Speaking in class was out of the question. And if I can't hold a conversation, how can I have any friends?



OTHER CONDITIONS THAT MAY CO-EXIST WITH ANXIETY DISORDERS

People with anxiety disorders often have other mental health problems as well. Here are those that often come along with anxiety disorders:

- Depression
- Another anxiety disorder
- Substance abuse

If you have one of these problems, you'll need to treat it as well.

How are anxiety disorders diagnosed?

Doctors use several different tools to learn about your condition and make a diagnosis:

- **Questionnaires.** Your doctor may use questionnaires (forms) to check for anxiety and other mental health problems. The questionnaires ask about your symptoms, stress, coping style, and support system.
- **Medical history.** Your doctor asks about your past and present illnesses and your family history.
- **Physical exam.** An exam helps your doctor know if your symptoms come from something other than an anxiety disorder.
- **Diagnostic criteria.** To make a diagnosis, your doctor compares your information to standard medical definitions for mental health disorders.

Self-management action plan

Your doctor and others can help you recover. But you're in charge of the process. After all, only you can make decisions about your treatment, follow through on your plan, and know what's working for you. This is **self-management**—and experts agree that it's a vital part of successful treatment for anxiety disorders. Here are a few key self-management tips:

- **Develop your treatment plan.** Get good information from your doctor and other trusted sources. Keep in mind that mental health care isn't "one size fits all." With your doctor, decide on a treatment plan that fits your unique situation.
- **Set goals for healthy living in ALL areas.** Finding balance in your life speeds your recovery. It also paves the way for happier, healthier times ahead. Set goals to make sure your whole life is in balance:
 - **Relationships.** Don't shut out family and friends! Example goals: Phone a friend every day. Attend scheduled social events. Volunteer.
My goal: _____
 - **Nutrition, exercise, and sleep.** Mind and body go hand in hand. Example goals: Drink 8 glasses of water each day. Eat 5-10 fruits and vegetables daily. Walk every day. Get 8 hours of sleep each night.
My goal: _____
 - **Recreation and renewal.** Commit to having fun and soothing your spirit. Example goals: Do your hobby. Listen to music. Attend religious or cultural events. Write in a journal. Meditate.
My goal: _____
- **Stick to your treatment.** Give treatment a chance to work. Take any medication as directed. Keep your appointments. Talk to your doctor if you don't see good results—you can always adjust your plan. Remember that you deserve relief, and have a great chance to get it.
- **Celebrate your recovery.** Reward yourself for meeting your "healthy living" goals. Celebrate the milestones in your recovery. Did you sleep well through the night? Go a few hours without obsessing? Face down one of your fears? Congratulate yourself! Your work is paying off.



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How are anxiety disorders treated?

Most anxiety disorders respond well to two types of treatment:

- **Medication.** Several different classes of medication are used to treat these disorders. If one type isn't working, remember that there are options. Working with your doctor, you can find the best medication and dosage for you.
- **Counseling.** Also called **psychotherapy** or "talk therapy," counseling can help you understand your problems and develop ways to work through them. There are different types of counseling, each with its special focus. For example, counseling may aim to uncover the source of your anxiety. It may focus on changing your thinking patterns. Or, it can teach new ways to help you cope. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) combines these strategies to help you "unlearn" old patterns and adopt healthier thoughts and reactions.

You may use these treatments alone or together. Although they may not cure your anxiety disorder, they can help take away your symptoms. And as your symptoms ease, your health improves.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Visit IHC's Mental Health Online Center: www.ihc.com/mentalhealth. You'll find materials on anxiety disorders and many other common mental health concerns. You'll also find links to other trusted sources for information, support, and advice.