

# 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 manage difficult situations.

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

Anxiety can come and go – but for some of us, it can stick around for a long time and end up having a big impact on daily life. When this happens, it might be time to do something about it.

## What are the symptoms of anxiety?

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



### Physical signs can include:

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



### Changes to thoughts, feelings or behaviour can include:

- worrying about things a lot of the time
- being unable to control the worries
- having trouble concentrating and paying attention

- worries that seem out of proportion
- being unable to relax
- avoiding people or places like school or parties
- withdrawing from friends and family
- feeling annoyed, irritated, or restless
- difficulty getting to sleep at night or waking up a lot during the night.

## What are the common types of anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders involve more than temporary worries or fears and are some of the most common mental health challenges experienced by young people. They can significantly affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves and interacts with others. 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. 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 a person to avoid situations where there are other people, like work, school, uni, TAFE, or hanging out with friends.

### Separation anxiety disorder

Some people experience intense fear about being away from loved ones – like parents or siblings – or often worry about them being hurt.

### Panic disorder

Some people have recurring panic attacks and ongoing fears about experiencing more panic attacks.

### 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

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

**Lots of people avoid things they're scared of. When it's getting in the way of daily life, it's time to get support.**

## What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are sudden rushes of intense anxiety or fear, together with frightening thoughts and physical feelings.

### Frightening thoughts might include:

- 'I'm going to die.'
- 'I can't breathe.'
- 'This isn't going to stop.'
- 'I'm having a heart attack.'

### Physical feelings might include:

- pounding heart
- sweating
- difficulty breathing
- shaking
- feeling dizzy
- feeling sick.


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


## What can I do to manage anxiety?

There are ways to manage your anxiety, some include:

- 1 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. You can also learn about stress and different ways you can manage it.
- 2 Talk about it.** It's a good idea to talk about how you're feeling – whether it's with your family, friends, a teacher, coach, your mob, or Elders. They can support you, help you understand what's going on, stick to your self-care goals, and get extra help if needed.
- 3 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 cope.
- 4 Be aware of avoidance.** It's normal to want to avoid situations that make you feel anxious. It might help 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 get better at managing anxious situations, you'll become more confident and motivated to keep it up.

-  **Try new breathing strategies.** Lots of anxiety symptoms involve a cycle of physical sensations - pounding heart, shortness of breath, trembling, or butterflies in the stomach. Working on controlling your breathing is a good way to try to interrupt that cycle. There are some apps and websites that can help.

-  **Limit your use of alcohol and other drugs.** While these things might help you to feel good in the short term, they can make you feel much worse in the longer term. See the Limit alcohol and other drugs to help your headspace Fact Sheet.

## 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.



**If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school 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](https://www.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.**

The headspace Clinical Reference Group have approved this clinical resource. Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, headspace makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information. Version 1.4, 05 July 2021