



UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY DISORDERS

When Panic, Fear, and Worries Overwhelm

Many of us worry from time to time. We fret over finances, feel anxious about job interviews, or get nervous about social gatherings. These feelings can be normal or even helpful. They may give us a boost of energy or help us focus. But for people with anxiety disorders, they can be overwhelming.

Anxiety disorders affect nearly 1 in 5 American adults each year. People with these disorders have feelings of fear and uncertainty that interfere with everyday activities and last for 6 months or more. Anxiety disorders can also raise your risk for other medical problems such as heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse, and depression.

The good news is that most anxiety disorders get better with therapy. The course of treatment depends on the type of anxiety disorder. Medications, psychotherapy (“talk therapy”), or a combination of both can usually relieve troubling symptoms.

“Anxiety disorders are one of the most treatable mental health problems we see,” says Dr. Daniel Pine, an NIH neuroscientist and psychiatrist. “Still, for reasons we don’t fully understand, most people who have these problems don’t get the treatments that could really help them.”

ANXIETY
DISORDERS
AFFECT NEARLY
1 IN 5 AMERICAN
ADULTS EACH
YEAR

One of the most common types of anxiety disorder is social anxiety disorder, or social phobia. It affects both women and men equally—a total of about 15 million U.S. adults. Without treatment, social phobia can last for years or even a lifetime. People with social phobia may worry for days or weeks before a social event. They’re often embarrassed, self-conscious, and afraid of being judged. They find it hard to talk to others. They may blush, sweat, tremble, or feel sick to their stomach when around other people.

Other common types of anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, which affects nearly 7 million American adults, and panic disorder, which affects about 6 million. Both are twice as common in women as in men.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

People with generalized anxiety disorder worry endlessly over everyday issues—like health, money, or family problems—even if they realize there’s little cause for concern.

They startle easily, can’t relax, and can’t concentrate. They find it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep. They may get headaches, muscle aches, or unexplained pains. Symptoms often get worse during times of stress.

People with panic disorder have sudden, repeated bouts of fear—called panic attacks—that last several minutes or more. During a panic attack, they may feel that they can’t breathe or that they’re having a heart attack. They

may fear loss of control or feel a sense of unreality. Not everyone who has panic attacks will develop panic disorder. But if the attacks recur without warning, creating fear of having another attack at any time, then it’s likely panic disorder.

TREATMENTS & STRATEGIES

We all use different strategies to adjust our emotions, often without thinking about it. If something makes you angry, you may try to tamp down your emotion to avoid making a scene. If something annoys you, try to ignore it, modify it, or entirely avoid it.

But these strategies can turn harmful over time. For instance, people with

social phobia might decide to avoid attending a professional conference so they can keep their anxiety in check. That makes them lose opportunities at work and miss chances to meet people and make friends.

“It’s important to be aware that many different kinds of treatments are available, and people with anxiety disorders tend to have very good responses to those treatments,” Pine adds. The best way to start is often by talking with your physician. If you’re a parent, talk with your child’s pediatrician. “These health professionals are generally prepared to help identify such problems and help patients get the appropriate care they need,” Pine says.



TROUBLED BY *Anxiety*?

If feelings of anxiety seem overwhelming or interfere with every-day activities:

- See your family doctor or nurse practitioner.
- The next step may be talking to a mental health professional. Consider finding someone trained in cognitive-behavioral therapy who is also open to using medication if needed. You may need to try several medicines before finding the right one.
- Consider joining a self-help or support group to share problems and achievements with others.
- Stress management techniques and mindfulness meditation may help relieve anxiety symptoms.