

# Anxiety Disorders



Occasional anxiety is an expected part of life. Someone might feel anxious when faced with a problem at work, before taking a test, or before making an important decision. But anxiety disorders involve more than temporary worry or fear. For a person with an anxiety disorder, the anxiety does not go away and can get worse over time. The symptoms can interfere with daily activities such as job performance, school work, and relationships. There are several types of anxiety disorders including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and phobia-related disorders.

- For a person with anxiety disorder, the anxiety does not go away and can get worse over time.
- There are several types of anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and phobia-related disorders.
- Researchers find both genetic and environmental factors contribute to the risk of developing an anxiety disorder.
- Anxiety disorders are generally treated with psychotherapy, medication, or both.

## Generalized Anxiety Disorder

People with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) display excessive anxiety or worry, most days for at least 6 months, about a number of things such as personal health, work, social interactions, and everyday routine life circumstances. The fear and anxiety can cause significant problems in areas of their life, such as social interactions, school, and work. Generalized anxiety disorder symptoms include:

- Feeling restless, wound-up, or on-edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Having difficulty concentrating; mind going blank
- Being irritable
- Having muscle tension
- Difficulty controlling feelings of worry
- Having sleep problems, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, restlessness, or unsatisfying sleep

## Panic Disorder

People with panic disorder have recurrent unexpected panic attacks. Panic attacks are sudden periods of intense fear that come on quickly and reach their peak within minutes. Attacks can occur unexpectedly or can be brought on by a trigger, such as a feared object or situation.

During a panic attack, people may experience:

- Heart palpitations, a pounding heartbeat, or an accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Sensations of shortness of breath, smothering, or choking
- Feelings of impending doom
- Feelings of being out of control

People with panic disorder often worry about when the next attack will happen and actively try to prevent future attacks by avoiding places, situations, or behaviors they associate with panic attacks.



Wheeler

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A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

## Phobia-Related Disorders

A phobia is an intense fear of or aversion to specific objects or situations. Although it can be realistic to be anxious in some circumstances, the fear people with phobias feel is out of proportion to the actual danger caused by the situation or object. People with a phobia:

- May have an irrational or excessive worry about encountering the feared object or situation
- Take active steps to avoid the feared object or situation
- Experience immediate intense anxiety upon encountering the feared object or situation
- Endure unavoidable objects and situations with intense anxiety

## Risk Factors

Researchers are finding that both genetic and environmental factors contribute to the risk of developing an anxiety disorder. Although the risk factors for each type of anxiety disorder can vary, some general risk factors for all types of anxiety disorders include:

- Temperamental traits of shyness or behavioral inhibition in childhood
- Exposure to stressful and negative life or environmental events in early childhood or adulthood
- A history of anxiety or other mental illnesses in biological relatives
- Some physical health conditions can produce or aggravate anxiety symptoms; a physical health exam is helpful in the evaluation of a possible anxiety disorder.

## Treatments And Therapies

Anxiety disorders are generally treated with psychotherapy, medication, or both. There are many ways to treat anxiety and people should work with their doctor to choose the treatment that is best for them.

**Psychotherapy** or “talk therapy” can help people with anxiety disorders. To be effective, psychotherapy must be directed at the person’s specific anxieties and tailored to his or her needs. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an example of psychotherapy. It teaches people different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to anxiety-producing and fearful objects and situations.

**Medication** does not cure anxiety disorders but can help relieve symptoms. Medication for anxiety is prescribed by doctors, such as a psychiatrist or primary care provider. Some states also allow psychologists who have received specialized training to prescribe psychiatric medications. The most common classes of medications used to combat anxiety disorders are anti-anxiety drugs (such as benzodiazepines), antidepressants, and beta-blockers.

**Support groups** might be beneficial for people looking to share their problems and achievements with others. Internet chat rooms might also be useful, but any advice received over the internet should be used with caution. Talking with a trusted friend or member of the clergy can also provide support. People should always check with their doctor before following any treatment advice.

**Stress management techniques and meditation** can help people with anxiety disorders calm themselves and may enhance the effects of therapy. Research suggests that aerobic exercise can help some people manage their anxiety; however, exercise should not take the place of standard care and more research is needed.

## Connecticut Resources

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services  
[ct.gov/dmhas](http://ct.gov/dmhas)

## National Resources

National Institute of Mental Health  
[nimh.nih.gov](http://nimh.nih.gov)

National Alliance on Mental Illness  
[nami.org](http://nami.org)

