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# Anxiety Disorders: Symptoms and Treatment

## *Guide for Adult Patients and Loved Ones*

Anxiety is an emotional state characterized by worried thoughts, feelings of tension, and in some cases, physiological symptoms like sweating, trembling, dizziness, and increased heart rate. Anxiety is sometimes equated with fear, but anxiety is typically longer lasting, and it centers on vaguely-defined or imaginary threats rather than clear and present dangers.

It is not unusual to experience anxiety from time to time, but persistent and recurring anxiety can indicate an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders consist of intense and/or continuous anxiety about particular situations or environments, such as work, personal responsibilities, or social interactions.

Almost 1 in 5 adults will experience some type of anxiety disorder in their lifetime, making it a very common mental health challenge. Anxiety disorders are about 1.6 times more prevalent in women than men. Age of onset varies considerably and according to the specific disorder; for example, phobia-related anxiety disorders typically begin during childhood, but other anxiety disorders may develop at any time during adulthood.

## **Types and Symptoms**

There are several types of anxiety disorders that differ in terms of how and when symptoms are experienced.

### **➤ Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**

GAD is characterized by persistent and excessive worry that interferes with daily activities, as well as persistent signs of physiological arousal, such as muscle tension and sleep disturbance. Individuals with GAD typically experience anxiety about everyday situations like work responsibilities, chores and personal duties, home and car maintenance, family health, and medical appointments. They might also have a tendency to strive for perfection and judge themselves harshly when they fall short of expectations.

### ➤ **Panic Disorder**

Panic disorder is distinguished by recurring attacks of severe anxiety or panic. These attacks include both physical and psychological distress, and they are generally unexpected, occurring for no apparent reason. Symptoms experienced during a panic attack may include: sweating, trembling, heart palpitations, chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, feeling detached, fear of losing control, and fear of dying. Panic attacks can at times occur in the context of another anxiety disorder.

### ➤ **Social Anxiety Disorder**

Social anxiety disorder involves intense anxiety and discomfort surrounding social situations. This anxiety is typically rooted in a fear of being embarrassed, humiliated, rejected, or looked down on by others. For example, a person with social anxiety disorder may have an extreme fear of public speaking, meeting new people, or eating/drinking in public, which can cause problems with daily functioning and impair their ability to form relationships. The extreme anxiety leads to either avoiding social situations or enduring them with marked distress.

### ➤ **Separation Anxiety Disorder**

An individual who has separation anxiety disorder experiences excessive anxiety about being away from someone to whom they are attached. They may be persistently worried about losing the person closest to them, resulting in a reluctance to be apart from this person. Other symptoms include refusing to leave the house or sleep without this person and experiencing frequent nightmares about separation.

### ➤ **Specific Phobias**

A specific phobia is an intense and exaggerated fear of an object, situation or activity that, for most people, triggers only normal, brief fear. Common phobias include public speaking, heights, flying, medical procedures, and animals and insects such as snakes and spiders. These phobias cause such distress that individuals may go to extreme lengths to avoid them even though they realize their fear is excessive or irrational.

### ➤ **Agoraphobia**

Agoraphobia is an atypical phobia in which a person fears being in situations where escape may be difficult or embarrassing. Examples include using public transportation, being in open spaces, being in enclosed places, standing in line or in a crowd, and being outside the home alone. A person with agoraphobia will actively avoid these uncomfortable situations, to the point that they may become unable to leave their home.

## **Treatments**

Anxiety disorders can be challenging to live with, but they are treatable, and many people who suffer from them live full, normal lives. Some disorders may resolve themselves over time, but others can be chronic. In either case, therapy and medication can help individuals with anxiety disorders manage their symptoms.

### **➤ Therapy and Skills Training**

Professional therapy and counseling are important components of treatment for anxiety disorders. Treatments like individual therapy, group therapy, and skills training can help individuals learn how to manage symptoms of anxiety.

Some common therapeutic practices include:

- Teaching you about anxiety disorders and what they mean.
- Talking about and helping you understand the thoughts and fears that cause symptoms of anxiety. When talking about these thoughts, the therapist is able to change them and help you think differently.
- Encouraging you to pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and to connect those to feelings of anxiety.
- Guiding you through relaxation, meditation, and deep breathing techniques, and teaching you how to perform these techniques on your own.
- Teaching you techniques to change your negative thought patterns.
- Slowly exposing you to your fears and to the objects or situations that make you feel anxious. This is a practice known as exposure therapy.

### **➤ Medication**

Psychiatric medications may be used in combination with therapy to help you manage your anxiety symptoms.

Antidepressants, especially selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), are commonly used to treat anxiety disorders. They are generally effective and have few side effects, although they do not provide immediate relief. Mild tranquilizers known as benzodiazepines may also be prescribed for short-term relief of intense anxiety, although they have many side effects, including drowsiness, and can be habit forming at higher doses.

You should speak with your clinician or psychiatrist about the potential benefits and possible negative side effects before taking any psychiatric medication for anxiety.

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## **Supporting a Loved One with Anxiety**

If you know someone who has an anxiety disorder or whom you suspect may have an anxiety disorder, then you might be looking for ways to help and support them. Family members, friends, and other supporters can be great sources of strength for individuals living with anxiety disorders.

The following section includes tips that can be helpful for supporting someone with an anxiety disorder. Keep in mind they might not all be right for you and your loved one, but it could be useful to give them a try.

### **Educate yourself**

Stay informed about what anxiety disorders are, what they look like, and how they can affect your loved one. Encourage them to become educated about anxiety disorders if they have not done so already.

### **Express your support**

Let your loved one know that you care about them, are concerned for their well-being, and are there to support them. This can help quiet any doubts they may have and reassure them that you are on their side.

### **Advocate for treatment**

Ask your loved one if they are seeking help for their disorder. If they are not, express to them why you think professional treatment could be helpful. Offer to help them find treatment if they would like you to.

### **Listen**

Ask how your loved one is feeling, and listen to what they tell you. Don't try to guide the conversation too much or downplay their challenges. Sometimes people just need to be heard, and they will notice whether or not you are truly listening.

### **Offer to help with tasks**

Ask your loved one if there are any daily tasks or obligations you can assist with. This can be helpful if their disorder makes certain tasks difficult for them, or if they are short on time because of their treatment schedule.

### **Give them space**

Give your loved one space when they need it. Do not push them to talk about their disorder or treatment if they don't want to. Avoid prying into intimate details if they seem reluctant to share with you. Respect their emotional boundaries.

**Involve them in plans**

Invite your loved one to join in social events and gatherings, either with a group or just between the two of you. Continue to socialize with them as you have in the past. This will help reassure them that your relationship has not changed because of their disorder.

**Treat them with respect**

Your loved one has not changed just because they are experiencing a mental health disorder. They are still the same person they were before. Treat them with the same respect and dignity you would anyone else, and do not patronize or talk down to them.

**Take care of yourself**

Your well-being matters just as much as your loved one's. Know your limits and seek support if you need it. Join support groups, check out community services, and seek professional guidance if you think it would be helpful. Don't let your whole life revolve around your loved one's condition.

**Don't make assumptions**

Even if you know a lot about anxiety disorders, do not make assumptions about your loved one's experiences. Ask questions and seek to understand their situation rather than telling them what to do.

**Don't criticize or blame**

Criticizing your loved one's behavior or blaming them for their situation will not help anyone. Be supportive in any way possible, and understand that they did not choose the challenges they are experiencing.

**Celebrate their progress**

Let your loved one know that you are proud of their progress both in and out of treatment. Celebrate their "wins" and successes in recovery. Encourage them to keep going!

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