

Anxiety disorders and how to cope

Like many other illnesses, anxiety disorders often have an underlying biological cause and frequently run in families. These disorders can be treated by several methods, yet only about one-third of those suffering receive treatment. Without treatment, many people with anxiety disorders turn to using alcohol and other drugs in an attempt to control their anxiety.

Anxiety disorders are serious medical illnesses that affect approximately 40 million American adults.

Overview

Anxiety disorder is not the same as mild anxiety that is caused by a stressful event such as making a presentation or going on a job interview. Anxiety disorders are chronic, relentless, and interfere with a person's daily activities. They can worsen if not treated. Many people with anxiety experience physical symptoms that include rapid or irregular heartbeat, shortness of breath, dizziness, lightheadedness, stomachaches, nausea, headaches and other pains.

Types of anxiety disorders

There are several types of anxiety disorders—each with their own distinct features:

- **Generalized anxiety disorders (GAD):** chronic and exaggerated worry and tension, even though nothing seems to cause it. Having this disorder means anticipating disaster, worrying about health, money, family, or work to a great degree, more often than not.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD):** anxious thoughts and/or rituals one feels can't be controlled. People with OCD often constantly have unwelcome thoughts or images, or have the urgent need to perform certain rituals, such as hand washing or locking doors.
- **Panic disorder:** unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear with physical symptoms. These symptoms may include chest pain, rapid heartbeats, shortness of breath, dizziness, or upset stomach. The anxious feelings can scare a person into feeling that they are having a heart attack or other life-threatening medical emergency.
- **Phobias:** constant, irrational fears of certain objects or situations. There are many types of phobias. Phobias can be so overwhelming that people actively avoid the feared objects or situations. People with a social phobia are excessively afraid of situations in which they may be humiliated or embarrassed.



Those with agoraphobia become afraid of situations in which they may panic and be unable to get help, or make an escape.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** an anxiety condition that follows a traumatic event. Often, people with PTSD will have recurring thoughts and memories of their ordeal and feel emotionally numb.

Diagnosis

If you believe you might be struggling with anxiety, it's important to see a physician. Your doctor will need to know about physical symptoms as well as feelings of worry and tension. The doctor will probably perform a physical exam and medical tests to be sure that the anxiety is not caused by a physical problem or the abuse of drugs or alcohol. The doctor will also ask about your history and symptoms, and about things that make the problem better or worse. These steps help determine the cause and type of anxiety disorder. With this information, the doctor will work with you to determine the best course of treatment.

Treatment

There are several different ways to treat anxiety disorders:

- Self-education about anxiety can help you feel more comfortable, promote healthy behavior and increase awareness about treatment options.
- Psychotherapy (counseling), especially cognitive-behavioral therapy, helps you learn ways to cope with anxiety-producing situations, and can improve family relationships.
- Exercise helps the condition. Fifteen or 20 minutes of mild aerobic exercise per day, such as walking, can reduce anxiety.
- Relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or deep breathing, are often helpful.
- Medications such as anti-anxiety agents or antidepressants provide symptom relief and can help counseling be more effective. The medicine can break the cycle of anxiety and significantly improve daily life.

How to cope with anxiety on a daily basis

Anxiety can become overwhelming. Below are helpful tips to assist you in dealing with anxious feelings.

- **Talk to someone.** Discuss your fears and anxieties with someone you trust.

- **Prepare for upcoming events.** Plan for occasions that you think will cause anxiety, like speaking in front of a group or dealing with an uncomfortable situation. Imagine yourself feeling calm, confident, and in control.
- **Don't try to do too much.** Taking on too many tasks can bring on anxiety.
- **Confront your fears.** Face your anxieties one step at a time. Anxiety is real, but with patience, it can be conquered.
- **Avoid nicotine and alcohol.** These substances can cause or worsen anxiety.
- **Eat healthy foods.** Eating a balanced, healthy diet is good for the mind and body.

Learn more about anxiety disorders

A number of organizations and consumer groups are dedicated to helping people with anxiety disorders. Two are listed below:

- **Anxiety and Depression Association of America**
www.adaa.org
- **Freedom From Fear**
www.freedomfromfear.org