



Anxiety: what is it?

Anxiety is a natural reaction that everyone experiences. Our 'fight or flight response' is the physiological response that helps us deal with potentially dangerous situations such as crossing a busy road or approaching a big black spider in the bathtub! However, for some people anxiety prevents them from living their life in the way that they would like.

Problem anxiety can take various forms: panic attacks that occur out of the blue; incredible fear about situations or objects that are not actually dangerous; uncontrollable concerns and worry about everything and anything; or compulsive repetition of certain behaviours in order to try to reduce anxiety, e.g. washing hands repeatedly to get rid of germs.

What are the Symptoms of Anxiety?

People who have an anxiety disorder often experience the common symptoms of fear and panic. During a panic attack, fear may be so intense that the person feels they will lose control, have a heart attack, or 'go crazy.'

In addition to fear and panic a person with an anxiety disorder may experience symptoms including:

- feeling irritable or uneasy
- excessively worrying about things
- appearing to others as being 'highly strung'
- having difficulty relaxing, concentrating and sleeping
- developing elaborate plans to avoid certain places, situations or objects
- experiencing physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, muscle spasm, sweating, shortness of breath, headaches and nausea with no physical cause.

What Are the Different Types of Anxiety Disorders?

Some of the main types of anxiety disorders are:

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**
Unrealistic and excessive worry accompanied by a feeling of being on edge, and physical tension.
- **Agoraphobia**
Fear of being in a situation where escape is difficult or where a panic attack may occur.

- **Specific Phobia**
An intense fear of particular objects or situations.
- **Social Phobia**
Fear of being the centre of attention, due to concern about being judged negatively by other people.
- **Panic Disorder**
Repeated panic attacks including all of the physical symptoms of panic along with fear of the panic attack itself. For example, people may fear the panic attack will cause them to lose control, go crazy, collapse, or even die.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**
OCD is characterised by the presence of either obsessions, or compulsions, or both. Obsessions are persistent and unwanted thoughts that constantly invade and disrupt a person's life. Compulsions are repetitive actions or rituals that are performed to ease anxiety or prevent a feared event from occurring.
- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**
Feelings of uncontrollable fear or flashbacks associated with a traumatic experience, resulting in a person feeling unable to function in their daily life.

What are the Causes of Anxiety?

Anxiety can be a result of an interaction between a number of factors including:

- **Environmental factors**
It seems that life experiences, such as our family environment, can contribute to the development of anxiety disorders in some cases.
- **Biological factors**
An imbalance of the chemicals in the brain that regulate feelings and physical reactions can alter thoughts, emotions or behaviours and result in anxiety.
- **Genetic factors**
Research shows that anxiety disorders run in some families though they may take a different form for each family member.
- **Personality**
Some personality types are more prone to anxiety. A person who reacts in a very emotional way and is easily upset may experience anxious thoughts and display anxious behaviours.

What Help is Available?

There are some very successful treatments and strategies available for people with an anxiety disorder. These include:

- Counselling and therapy - in particular cognitive-behavioural therapy
- Medication
- Self-help support groups and self-treatment programs
- Online therapy (www.crufad.org see under climate.tv)

What Can I Do To Help Myself?

- Find out more about anxiety by accessing the resources and information listed below.
- See your local doctor (GP) or have an assessment conducted by a mental health professional, e.g. a psychologist.
- If treatment is required, discuss your options with your health professional and decide on a program that is right for you.
- Don't let misconceptions about mental illness or anxiety stop you from seeking help.

Look after your mind as well as your body by adopting a healthier lifestyle including: regular exercise, a healthy eating plan, regular sleeping patterns, learning to reduce your stress levels and relaxing. This is different for everybody. You may find watching TV, reading a book, going for a walk, or having a long bubble bath particularly helpful. Others find slow breathing or remedial massage beneficial.

Please note, the use of alcohol, cannabis and other recreational drugs is discouraged for anyone suffering anxiety. Rather than assisting with long term recovery, these substances can cause a worsening of symptoms.

Useful Websites

Anxiety Disorders Support and Information www.mentalhealth.asn.au

Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression (CRUfAD) www.crufad.org

Anxiety Network Australia www.anxietynetwork.com

Talk to Someone

We often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking to and sharing our feelings with other people. This may be as simple as talking to your partner or best friend. Other people may find regular sessions with a psychiatrist, counsellor or psychologist helpful. If you are concerned that you or someone you know is showing signs of an anxiety disorder it is important to seek help from a skilled mental health professional.

- Contact Anxiety Disorders Information on 1300 794 992 for information about your nearest specialist Anxiety Clinic. They are located in most of the major hospitals and universities.
- Speak to your doctor (GP).
- Contact your local Community Health Centre (see under 'Community Health' in the Business & Government White Pages).
- Contact the Australian Psychological Society (APS) on 1800 333 497 for referral to a psychologist in your area.



**Telephone Interpreter
Service 131 450**

If English is not your first language please call the Mental Health Information Service through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). This service is free to non-English speaking Australian citizens or permanent residents. TIS have access to interpreters speaking more than 120 languages and dialects.

Mental Health Resource Centre

The Resource Centre contains material that promotes a better understanding of mental health issues. New books and DVDs are purchased on a regular basis and visitors are welcome to come in and browse.

Members of MHA, CAG and ARAFMI may check-out resources on loan. The length of the loan is 3 weeks. Membership costs between \$10 - \$30 per individual per annum. Please note that most of the reference books are not available for loan

You will find the Resource Centre Booklist on our website: www.mentalhealth.asn.au for further information contact 1300 794 991.

Medicare rebates and accessing private practitioners

What is the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists?

Psychiatrists are medically trained doctors who specialise in the treatment of mental illness. Like GPs they can prescribe, administer and monitor medication. Psychiatrists do not advertise so it is up to your GP to refer you to someone appropriate.

Psychologists are trained in human behaviour and use a range of therapies to treat patients. They provide services including assessment, psychological testing, and various types of psychotherapy and counselling.

Medicare rebate for psychologists

A Medicare rebate is now available for a number of sessions per calendar year with a registered psychologist* with a Medicare Provider Number. To obtain the rebate you must be referred by an appropriate medical practitioner, i.e. a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician. The practitioner will ensure that you meet the eligibility requirements and develop a management plan for your condition.

The cost and rebate from Medicare can vary depending on the consultation length and fee charged. If the psychologist bulk bills there will be no extra cost.

For further information about the rebate or to locate a psychologist in your area contact the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 www.psychology.org.au

*Similar Medicare rebates also exist for mental health accredited social workers and occupational therapists.

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed. The listed websites provide additional information, but should not be taken as an endorsement or recommendation.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW. This and other fact sheets are available for download from www.mentalhealth.asn.au. The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

This fact sheet was last updated in July 2010.



Mental Health Information Service
Mental Health Association NSW Inc
Level 5, 80 William Street
East Sydney NSW 2011

Phone: 1300 794 991
Fax: (02) 9339 6066
Email: info@mentalhealth.asn.au
Web: www.mentalhealth.asn.au