

Anxiety: What does it look like?

What is anxiety?

Everyone feels anxious at one time or another, especially when they're under pressure. The right balance of anxiety is actually positive, because it can enhance performance under stressful conditions. Too much anxiety however, can be detrimental to not only performance, but also to your general wellbeing and mental health.

Anxiety as a mental health condition is when intense feelings of anxiousness (often without reason) don't go away for long periods of time. Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia and on average, 1 in 4 people will experience anxiety at some time in their life.

Types of Anxiety

There are different types of anxiety conditions, and most people with anxiety will experience more than one type. The most common types are:

- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)** – feeling irrationally anxious or worried for most of the time
- **Social anxiety** – fear of being judged, laughed at or criticised even in normal everyday situations, such as meeting unfamiliar people
- **Specific phobias** – an intense, irrational fear of a specific object or event that is completely out of proportion to the actual threat and makes it difficult to go about daily life
- **Panic disorder** – when a person experiences panic attacks – uncontrolled and overwhelming feelings of anxiety coupled with physical symptoms such as shortness of breath

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is usually caused by a combination of factors, including a family genetic predisposition, personality type (e.g. people who are perfectionistic, lack self-esteem, are easily agitated or need control) and stressful life experiences.

Stressful life experiences could include large changes in day to day life (e.g. in a workplace or school), a relationship breakdown, bereavement, financial difficulty or excessive drug and alcohol use.

Signs of anxiety

The normal anxiety that we all experience at some time is usually attached to some kind of event or stressful situation – such as moving to a new house or going to a job interview.

The symptoms experienced by people with an anxiety condition happen more often, aren't necessarily connected to a particular stressful event, and impact on how they live their day to day life.

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Anxiety can have both psychological and physiological signs:

Psychological Signs

- Excessive worry (about past events or what might happen in the future)
- Nervousness or feeling on edge
- Poor concentration and difficulty making decisions
- Feelings of panic or fear when there is no real danger
- Irritability, impatience, anger, confusion,
- Compulsions or obsessions

Physiological & Behavioural Signs

- Feeling tense, wound up and edgy
- Difficulty relaxing or sleeping
- Quick breathing
- Racing heart
- Trembling and sweating
- Muscle tension
- Dizziness or faintness
- Avoidance of situations that make you feel anxious

Seeking help

The good news is there are a range of effective treatments available for anxiety. The type of treatment will depend on what type of anxiety is being experienced.

For mild anxiety, lifestyle changes (such as physical exercise) or a reduction in stress may be recommended. For more moderate to severe cases, psychological or medical treatments are available.

Psychological treatments focus on changing thought patterns to reduce irrational thoughts. One example is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which works to adjust unhelpful thoughts and behaviour that contribute to feelings of anxiety to a more positive and rational focus.

The main medical treatment for anxiety is anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication. These are usually prescribed by a GP in conjunction with psychological treatment. There are a lot of common misconceptions about antidepressants, so it's important to talk to a GP to make sure you have the correct information

There are many other methods that can be used to help manage anxiety. These may include:

- Slow breathing techniques
- Mindfulness
- Progressive muscle relaxation exercises
- Healthy lifestyle changes (such as diet, exercise or connecting with friends or family)