

# Anxiety Disorders



Office of  
Mental Health



# Anxiety Disorders

Do you often find yourself worrying about everyday issues for no obvious reason? Are you always waiting for disaster to strike or excessively worried about things such as health, money, family, work, or school? Do you sometimes have sudden attacks of anxiety and overwhelming fear that last for several minutes? Are you afraid of being judged by others? Are you self-conscious in everyday social situations?

If any of these resonate with you, you may have generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, or social anxiety disorder. Starting with generalized anxiety disorder, GAD can make daily life feel like a constant state of worry, fear, and dread. The good news is GAD is treatable. Learn more about the symptoms of GAD and how to find help.

## What is generalized anxiety disorder?

Occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. Many people may worry about things such as health, money, or family problems. But people with GAD feel extremely worried or nervous more frequently about these and other things—even when there is little or no reason to worry about them. GAD usually involves a persistent feeling of anxiety or dread that interferes with how you live your life. It is not the same as occasionally worrying about things or experiencing anxiety due to stressful life events. People living with GAD experience frequent anxiety for months, if not years.

GAD develops slowly. It often starts around age 30, although it can occur in childhood. The disorder is more common in women than in men.

# What are the signs and symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder?

## **People with GAD may:**

- Worry excessively about everyday things
- Have trouble controlling their worries or feelings of nervousness
- Know that they worry much more than they should
- Feel restless and have trouble relaxing
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Startle easily
- Have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Tire easily or feel tired all the time
- Have headaches, muscle aches, stomachaches, or unexplained pains
- Have a hard time swallowing
- Tremble or twitch
- Feel irritable or “on edge”
- Sweat a lot, feel lightheaded, or feel out of breath
- Have to go to the bathroom frequently

## **Children and teens with GAD often worry excessively about:**

- Their performance in activities such as school or sports
- Catastrophes, such as earthquakes or war
- The health of others, such as family members

## **Adults with GAD are often highly nervous about everyday situations, such as:**

- Job security or performance
- Health
- Finances
- The health and well-being of their children or other family members
- Being late
- Completing household chores and other responsibilities

Both children and adults with GAD may experience physical symptoms such as pain, fatigue, or shortness of breath that make it hard to function and that interfere with daily life.

Symptoms may fluctuate over time and are often worse during times of stress—for example—with a physical illness, during school exams, or during a family or relationship conflict.

## **What causes generalized anxiety disorder?**

Risk for GAD can run in families. Several parts of the brain and biological processes play a key role in fear and anxiety. By learning more about how the brain and body function in people with anxiety disorders, researchers may be able to develop better treatments. Researchers have also found that external causes, such as experiencing a traumatic event or being in a stressful environment, may put you at higher risk for developing GAD.

## **How is generalized anxiety disorder treated?**

If you think you're experiencing symptoms of GAD, talk to a health care provider. After discussing your history, a health care provider may conduct a physical exam to ensure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. A health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker. The first step to effective treatment is to get a diagnosis, usually from a mental health professional.

GAD is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”), medication, or both. Speak with a health care provider about the best treatment for you.

# Panic Disorder: When Fear Overwhelms

Do you sometimes have sudden attacks of anxiety and overwhelming fear that last for several minutes? Maybe your heart pounds, you sweat, and you feel like you can't breathe or think clearly. Do these attacks occur at unpredictable times with no apparent trigger, causing you to worry about the possibility of having another one at any time?

An untreated panic disorder can affect your quality of life and lead to difficulties at work or school. The good news is panic disorder is treatable. Learn more about the symptoms of panic disorder and how to find help.

## What is panic disorder?

People with panic disorder have frequent and unexpected panic attacks. These attacks are characterized by a sudden wave of fear or discomfort or a sense of losing control even when there is no clear danger or trigger. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop panic disorder.

Panic attacks often include physical symptoms that might feel like a heart attack, such as trembling, tingling, or rapid heart rate. Panic attacks can occur at any time. Many people with panic disorder worry about the possibility of having another attack and may significantly change their life to avoid having another attack. Panic attacks can occur as frequently as several times a day or as rarely as a few times a year.

Panic disorder often begins in the late teens or early adulthood. Women are more likely than men to develop panic disorder.

# What are the signs and symptoms of panic disorder?

People with panic disorder may have:

- Sudden and repeated panic attacks of overwhelming anxiety and fear
- A feeling of being out of control, or a fear of death or impending doom during a panic attack
- An intense worry about when the next panic attack will happen
- A fear or avoidance of places where panic attacks have occurred in the past
- Physical symptoms during a panic attack, such as:
  - Pounding or racing heart
  - Sweating
  - Chills
  - Trembling
  - Difficulty breathing
  - Weakness or dizziness
  - Tingly or numb hands
  - Chest pain
  - Stomach pain or nausea

# What causes panic disorder?

Panic disorder sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some family members have it while others don't. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain and certain biological processes may play a crucial role in fear and anxiety. Some researchers think panic attacks are like "false alarms" where our body's typical survival instincts are active either too often, too strongly, or some combination of the two. For example, someone with panic disorder might feel their heart pounding and assume they're having a heart attack. This may lead to a vicious cycle, causing a person to experience panic attacks seemingly out of the blue, the central feature of panic disorder. Researchers are studying how the brain and body interact in people with panic disorder to create more specialized treatments. In addition, researchers are looking at the ways stress and environmental factors play a role in the disorder.

## **How is panic disorder treated?**

If you're experiencing symptoms of panic disorder, talk to a health care provider. After discussing your history, a health care provider may conduct a physical exam to ensure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. A health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker. The first step to effective treatment is to get a diagnosis, usually from a mental health professional.

Panic disorder is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called "talk therapy"), medication, or both. Speak with a health care provider about the best treatment for you.

# Social Anxiety Disorder: More Than Just Shyness

Are you afraid of being judged by others? Are you self-conscious in everyday social situations? Do you avoid meeting new people due to fear or anxiety? If you have been feeling this way for at least 6 months and these feelings make it hard for you to do everyday tasks—such as talking to people at work or school—you may have social anxiety disorder.

Social anxiety disorder is an intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. This fear can affect work, school, and other daily activities. It can even make it hard to make and keep friends. The good news is social anxiety disorder is treatable. Learn more about the symptoms of social anxiety disorder and how to find help.

## What is social anxiety disorder?

Social anxiety disorder is a common type of anxiety disorder. A person with social anxiety disorder feels symptoms of anxiety or fear in situations where they may be scrutinized, evaluated, or judged by others, such as speaking in public, meeting new people, dating, being on a job interview, answering a question in class, or having to talk to a cashier in a store. Doing everyday things, such as eating or drinking in front of others or using a public restroom, also may cause anxiety or fear due to concerns about being humiliated, judged, and rejected.

The fear that people with social anxiety disorder have in social situations is so intense that they feel it is beyond their control. For some people, this fear may get in the way of going to work, attending school, or doing everyday things. Other people may be able to accomplish these activities but experience a great deal of fear or anxiety when they do. People with social anxiety disorder may worry about engaging in social situations for weeks before they happen. Sometimes, they end up avoiding places or events that cause distress or generate feelings of embarrassment.

Some people with the disorder do not have anxiety related to social interactions but have it during performances instead. They feel symptoms of anxiety in situations such as giving a speech, competing in a sports game, or playing a musical instrument on stage.

Social anxiety disorder usually starts during late childhood and may resemble extreme shyness or avoidance of situations or social interactions. It occurs more frequently in females than in males, and this gender difference is more pronounced in adolescents and young adults. Without treatment, social anxiety disorder can last for many years, or even a lifetime.

## **What are the signs and symptoms of social anxiety disorder?**

When having to perform in front of or be around others, people with social anxiety disorder may:

- Blush, sweat, or tremble
- Have a rapid heart rate
- Feel their “mind going blank,” or feel sick to their stomach
- Have a rigid body posture, or speak with an overly soft voice
- Find it difficult to make eye contact, be around people they don’t know, or talk to people in social situations, even when they want to
- Feel self-consciousness or fear that people will judge them negatively
- Avoid places where there are other people

## **What causes social anxiety disorder?**

Risk for social anxiety disorder may run in families, but no one knows for sure why some family members have it while others don’t. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain are involved in fear and anxiety and that genetics influences how these areas function. By studying how the brain and body interact in people with social anxiety disorder, researchers may be able to create more targeted treatments. In addition, researchers are looking at the ways stress and environmental factors play a role in the disorder.

# How is social anxiety disorder treated?

If you're concerned you may have symptoms of social anxiety disorder, talk to a health care provider. After discussing your history, a health care provider may conduct a physical exam to ensure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. A health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker. The first step to effective treatment is to get a diagnosis, usually from a mental health professional.

Social anxiety disorder is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called "talk therapy"), medication, or both. Speak with a health care provider about the best treatment for you.

## Treatments and Therapies for Anxiety Disorders

**Anxiety Disorders are generally treated with psychotherapy, medication, or both.**

### Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a research-supported type of psychotherapy, is commonly used to treat anxiety disorders. CBT teaches you different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations to help you feel less anxious and fearful. CBT also can help you learn and practice social skills, which is very important for treating anxiety disorders. CBT has been well studied and is the gold standard for psychotherapy.

Exposure therapy is a CBT method that focuses on progressively confronting the fears underlying an anxiety disorder to help you engage in activities you have been avoiding. Exposure therapy is sometimes used along with relaxation exercises. CBT delivered in a group therapy format also can offer unique benefits for anxiety disorders.

Another treatment option for anxiety disorders is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT takes a different approach than CBT to negative thoughts and uses strategies such as mindfulness and goal setting to reduce your discomfort and anxiety. Compared to CBT, ACT is a newer form of psychotherapy treatment, so less data are available on its effectiveness. However, different therapies work for different types of people, so it can be helpful to discuss what form of therapy may be right for you with a mental health professional.

## Medication

Health care providers may prescribe medication to treat anxiety disorders. Different types of medication can be effective in treating these disorders, including:

- Antidepressants, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
- Beta-blockers
- Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines

SSRI and SNRI antidepressants are commonly used to treat depression, but they also can help treat the symptoms of anxiety disorders. They may take several weeks to start working. Antidepressants may also cause side effects, such as headaches, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. These side effects are usually not severe, especially if the dose starts off low and is increased slowly over time. Talk to your health care provider about any side effects that you may experience.

Beta-blockers can help control some of the physical symptoms of social anxiety disorder, such as rapid heart rate, sweating, and tremors. Beta-blockers are commonly the medication of choice for the “performance anxiety” type of social anxiety disorder.

Benzodiazepines, which are anti-anxiety sedative medications, are powerful and begin working right away to reduce anxious feelings. These medications can be very effective in rapidly decreasing anxiety, but some people build up a tolerance to them and need higher and higher doses to get the same effect. Some people even become dependent on them. Therefore, a health care provider may prescribe them only for brief periods of time if you need them.

Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. Many people try more than one medication before finding the best one for them. A health care provider can work with you to find the best medication, dose, and duration of treatment for you. People with social anxiety disorder usually obtain the best results with a combination of medication and CBT or other psychotherapies.

## **Support Groups**

Many people with anxiety find support groups helpful. In a group of people who all have an anxiety disorder, you can receive unbiased, honest feedback about how others in the group see you. This way, you can learn that your thoughts about judgment and rejection are not true or are distorted. You also can learn how others with anxiety disorders approach and overcome the fears.

Support groups are available both in person and online. However, any advice you receive from a support group member should be used cautiously and does not replace treatment recommendations from a health care provider.

Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. A healthy lifestyle also can help combat anxiety. Make sure to get enough sleep and exercise, eat a healthy diet, and turn to family and friends who you trust for support.

## **How can I support myself and others with anxiety disorders?**

### **Educate Yourself**

A good way to help yourself or a loved one who may be struggling with an anxiety disorder is to seek information. Research the warning signs, learn about treatment options, and keep up to date with current research.

### **Communicate**

If you are experiencing anxiety disorder symptoms, have an honest conversation about how you're feeling with someone you trust. If you think that a friend or family member may be struggling with an anxiety disorder, set aside a time to talk with them to express your concern and reassure them of your support.

### **Know When to Seek Help**

If your anxiety, or the anxiety of a loved one, starts to cause problems in everyday life—such as avoiding social situations at school, at work, or with friends and family—it's time to seek professional help. Talk to a health care provider about your mental health.

# Finding Help

## New York State Mental Health Program Directory

The Mental Health Program Directory provides information on all programs in New York State that are operated, licensed or funded by the State Office of Mental Health (OMH). This site includes three search options: Basic Search, Advanced Search, and Full Directory. Definitions for all programs are available under the Support tab, along with directory help and information on program data collection.

Find services close to you at: <https://my.omh.ny.gov/bi/pd/saw.dll?PortalPages#report>

## Mental Health Treatment Program Locator

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides this online resource for locating mental health treatment facilities and programs. The Mental Health Treatment Locator section of the Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator lists facilities providing mental health services to persons with mental illness.

Find a facility in your state at: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

## For Immediate Help

**If you are in crisis, experiencing emotional distress, or worried about someone you know:**

- Call or text the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or chat at [988lifeline.org/chat](https://988lifeline.org/chat). You can also text the Crisis Text Line (GOT5 to 741741). These services are available 24/7 to anyone and are completely confidential.

**If you are thinking about harming yourself or thinking about suicide:**

- Tell someone who can help right away
- Call your licensed mental health professional if you are already working with one
- Call your doctor
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency department

**If a loved one is considering suicide:**

- Do not leave them alone
- Try to get your loved one to seek immediate help from a doctor or the nearest hospital emergency room, or call 988
- Remove access to firearms, medications or other potential tools for suicide

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The New York State Office of Mental Health thanks the National Institute of Mental Health for providing the information contained in this booklet.

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For questions or complaints regarding mental health services anywhere in New York State please contact:

New York State  
Office of Mental Health  
Customer Relations  
44 Holland Avenue  
Albany, NY 12229  
(800) 597-8481 (toll-free)

For information about mental health services in your community, contact the New York State Office of Mental Health regional office nearest you:

Central New York Field Office  
545 Cedar Street, 2nd Floor  
Syracuse, NY 13210-2319  
(315) 426-3930

Hudson River Field Office  
10 Ross Circle, Suite 5N  
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601  
(845) 454-8229

Long Island Field Office  
998 Crooked Hill Road  
Building #45-3  
West Brentwood, NY 11717-1087  
(631) 761-2508

New York City Field Office  
330 Fifth Avenue, 9th Floor  
New York, NY 10001-3101  
(212) 330-1650

Western New York Field Office  
737 Delaware Avenue, Suite 200  
Buffalo, NY 14209  
(716) 533-4075



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Mental Health

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**Call/Text 988 or  
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