

Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of impending threat or danger. Anxiety is often confused with fear and stress, and these experiences can be hard to tell apart. While fear and stress are appropriate responses to actual danger or actual demands on us, anxiety occurs in the *absence* of real danger or demands.

When we get anxious, our sympathetic nervous system reacts as if we are facing a real threat and responds to help us survive by either fighting the threat, fleeing from it or freezing (hiding). Even though we might be anxious about an audition or an upcoming assessment, something unrelated to our physical survival, our body reacts as if we are at risk. We may experience:

Physiological symptoms

- Increased heart rate, with strong palpitations and increased breathing rate. This is to help transport oxygen to prepare for action.
- Tingly fingers and toes. This is due to a redistribution of blood from the extremities.
- Increased sweating. A slippery body is harder to grab, and the body is cooled to protect from overheating.
- Pupils become wider. This helps let in more light into the eye so we can see hidden dangers in dark places.
- Dry mouth or nausea or needing to go to the bathroom. This is due to decreased activity in the digestive system.
- Muscle tension. To prepare to flee or fight, there is tension, but without a way to discharge it, we may experience trembling, pacing or aches and pains.

Behavioural symptoms

- Foot tapping, pacing and giving snappy responses are common when we are anxious. This can be confused with aggression and is related to the body preparing to run away from or fight a threat.

Cognitive symptoms

- Attention shifts to vigilance for threat in our surroundings, which might result in difficulty concentrating.
- We might feel light-headed, and our mind might go blank. Some people say it feels like they are “going crazy”.
- Our minds can turn to catastrophising (believing the worst will happen). We might also find ourselves spiralling into worry, to try to find an explanation for the anxiety or prepare (and plan) for the worst.

Is it common?

Yes, most people experience anxiety from time to time. Anxiety is part of the natural range of emotions that all humans feel. However, if regular day-to-day things trigger anxiety, such as going to the supermarket, showing up to class, or worrying about

undiagnosed illness, anxiety could interfere with your life, and you may consider seeking treatment. One in four Australians are affected by anxiety disorders in their lifetime and it is the most common category of mental health issues in the country. The important thing to remember is that help is available and anxiety disorders can be treated.

What causes anxiety?

When a person develops an anxiety problem, it is usually due to a combination of biological and psychological factors. Someone who has family members who experience frequent anxiety may have an increased risk of developing an anxiety problem, but this is by no means certain. Your current lifestyle and events that have happened early in life are also important factors. If you learnt as a child to be fearful of and avoid certain situations, this pattern can continue into adulthood and may need time and support to change.

OK, so I'm anxious. What can I do?

Lowering anxiety in the moment

Practising relaxation and deep breathing helps calm down your nervous system and counteracts the fight / flight / freeze mode. There are plenty of guided relaxation and deep breathing audio recordings available for free online, as well as apps developed for this purpose. Try practicing the relaxation and breathing skills daily, such as before sleep, so that you can easily use the skills when you need them in anxiety-provoking situations.

Lifestyle factors

Improving lifestyle factors such as reducing unhelpful stress and creating a positive self-care routine can lead to lower anxiety over time. Regular sleep, regular nutritious meals and exercise can go a long way to alleviating and reducing anxiety.

No more avoidance!

If your anxiety is leading you to avoid things, you may be trapped in the anxiety-avoidance cycle. When you avoid a perceived threat, you might feel a short-term relief from anxiety, but over time, your confidence lowers, and anxiety increases. It's short-term gain for long-term pain! Graded exposure is one way to break free from the cycle, help you build confidence and experience less anxiety over time.

Accepting uncertainty

Anxiety is linked to feelings of uncertainty and can cause us to second-guess ourselves and our memory. We might engage in repeated checking behaviours or asking others for reassurance.

This can give short-term relief but much like the anxiety-avoidance cycle, it leads to lower confidence and increased anxiety over time. (And it usually annoys our friends and family as well!) Finding ways to tolerate and accept uncertainty can go a long way to managing anxiety.

Treatment options

Psychological Counselling

Talking with a psychologist, such as those available on all ECU Campuses, can be helpful in developing skills for overcoming anxiety problems. Psychological treatment is often enough, but sometimes a combination of medical and psychological treatment is needed to overcome an anxiety disorder.

Medical Treatment

A General Practitioner (GP) can help treat anxiety, which can be helpful for some people, particularly if you have significant sleep problems. Your GP can also refer you to specialists who can help you manage your particular symptoms.

How can I help someone else who is anxious?

You can be an important support to a friend or family member who is anxious:

- With empathy and compassion, you can be a support (not a crutch) in helping others overcome avoidance and becoming more active.
- If your friend seeks reassurance from you, be understanding and patient while realising that it is unhelpful for them (and your relationship) that they rely on you for constant reassurance.
- Try to encourage them to use some of the techniques described above to help themselves or seeking professional support if their anxiety is intense or long-lasting.

More reading

Centre for Clinical Interventions self-help resources:
cci.health.wa.gov.au

Beyond Blue: beyondblue.org.au


Black Dog Institute: Understanding Anxiety:
blackdoginstitute.org.au


Scan to access
additional tip
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Want to chat to someone?

For a confidential – and free – chat about your general situation, please contact our ECU Psychologist, or the Psychological Counselling Support Team service to make an appointment at any of our campuses.

 counselling@ecu.edu.au

 (08) 6304 6706

 learningadviser@ecu.edu.au

Alternatively, you can discuss study techniques and tips with a Learning Adviser in our Academic Skills Centre.