

# Understanding anxiety

Feeling worried or nervous is a normal part of everyday life. Everyone frets or feels anxious from time to time. Mild to moderate anxiety can help you focus your attention, energy and motivation. If anxiety is severe, you may have feelings of helplessness, confusion and extreme worry that are out of proportion with the actual seriousness or likelihood of the feared event. Overwhelming anxiety that interferes with daily life is not normal. This type of anxiety may be a symptom of an anxiety disorder, or it may be a symptom of another problem, such as depression.

Anxiety can cause physical and emotional symptoms. A specific situation or fear can cause some or all of these symptoms for a short time. When the situation passes, the symptoms usually go away.

Physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Trembling, twitching or shaking
- Feeling of fullness in the throat or chest
- Breathlessness or rapid heartbeat
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Sweating or cold, clammy hands
- Feeling jumpy
- Muscle tension, aches or soreness (myalgias)
- Extreme tiredness
- Sleep problems, such as the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, early waking or restlessness (not feeling rested when you wake up)

Anxiety affects the part of the brain that helps control how you communicate. This makes it harder to express yourself creatively or function effectively in relationships. Emotional symptoms of anxiety include:

- Restlessness, irritability or feeling on edge or keyed up
- Worrying too much
- Fearing that something bad is going to happen, or feeling doomed
- Inability to concentrate, or feeling like your mind goes blank



## Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders occur when people have both physical and emotional symptoms. Anxiety disorders interfere with how a person gets along with others and affect daily activities. Women are twice as likely as men to have problems with anxiety disorders. Examples of anxiety disorders include panic attacks, phobias and generalised anxiety disorder.

Often the cause of anxiety disorders is not known. Many people with an anxiety disorder say that they have felt nervous and anxious all their lives. This problem can occur at any age. Children who have at least one parent with a diagnosis of depression are more than twice as likely to have an anxiety disorder than other children.

Anxiety disorders often occur with other problems, such as:

- Mental health problems, such as depression.
- Substance use
- A physical problem, such as heart or lung disease. A complete medical examination may be needed before an anxiety disorder can be diagnosed.



## Panic attacks

A panic attack is a sudden feeling of extreme anxiety or intense fear without a clear cause or when there is no danger. Panic attacks are common. They sometimes occur in otherwise healthy people. Panic attacks usually last only a few minutes, but an attack may last longer. And for some people, the anxiety can get worse quickly during the attack.

Symptoms include feelings of dying or losing control of yourself, rapid breathing (hyperventilation), numbness or tingling of the hands or lips, and a racing heart. You may feel dizzy, sweaty or shaky. Other symptoms include trouble breathing, chest pain or tightness, and an irregular heartbeat. These symptoms come on suddenly and without warning.

Sometimes symptoms of a panic attack are so intense that the person fears that they are having a heart attack. Many of the symptoms of a panic attack can occur with other illnesses, such as hyperthyroidism, coronary artery disease or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). A complete medical examination may be needed before an anxiety disorder can be diagnosed.

People who have repeated unexpected panic attacks and worry about the attacks are said to have a panic disorder.



## Phobias

Phobias are extreme and irrational fears that interfere with daily life. People with phobias have fears that are out of proportion to real danger, and they are not able to control them.

Phobias are common and are sometimes present with other conditions, such as panic disorder or Tourette's disorder. Most people deal with phobias by avoiding the situation or object that causes them to feel panic (avoidance behaviour).

A phobic disorder occurs when the avoidance behaviour becomes so extreme that it interferes with your ability to participate in your daily activities. There are three main types of phobic disorder:

- Fear of being alone or in public places where help might not be available or escape is impossible (agoraphobia)
- Fear of situations where the individual might be exposed to criticism by others (social phobia)
- Fear of specific things (specific phobia)

Phobias can be treated to help reduce feelings of fear and anxiety. Talk to your doctor if you feel like you have the symptoms of anxiety.



### Critical support when you need it

Visit [optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter](https://optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter) for additional critical support resources and information.

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