



Breathe

Understanding anxiety

Facts about anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States. In fact, 40 million U.S. adults are affected by an anxiety disorder.¹ Everyone worries. But how do you know your worrying is a problem? We've put together some facts about this important topic.

What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety isn't just a feeling. It often shows itself in the body. It can look like:

- Racing heart
- Shaking hands
- Dry mouth
- Sweaty palms
- Upset stomach

When a person feels anxious over a long period of time, he or she might have other symptoms. It's important to check with a doctor to figure out the cause. But anxiety can lead to issues such as sleep or digestion problems, headaches or lowered immunity. And it can make other health issues flare up.

What causes anxiety?

Most people feel scared or anxious at some time in their lives. And it's normal to worry about things at times. Many people feel anxious when they're faced with a life problem, decision or change. But anxiety disorders are different. They can get in the way of people living the lives they want.

Feelings of fear are meant to help us. So when we feel fear or anxiety, it's our bodies trying to help us cope. It doesn't mean we're weak. Science shows most mental health issues are due to complex factors.

Anxiety disorders may result from biological factors that change the way the brain works. Studies have shown long-term stress can change nerve centers in the brain.² Anxiety can also run in families. And sometimes a trauma or even a welcome event such as a wedding or promotion can trigger anxiety.³

¹[Facts & Statistics](#). Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Accessed March 2018.

²Sanders, Robert. [New evidence that chronic stress predisposes brain to mental illness](#). Berkeley News. Accessed March 2018.

³[Causes of Anxiety and Depression: Symptoms and Signs](#). The Ranch. Accessed March 2018.

What are the types of anxiety disorders?

People get anxious about different things. But when it comes to anxiety disorders, most of them fall into one of these categories:

- **Panic disorder.** Many people have panic attacks at some point in their lives. A panic attack can look and feel like a heart attack. It can include symptoms such as sweating, chest pain, choking and irregular heartbeat. When people have panic disorder, they tend to have repeated panic attacks and fear future episodes. They may avoid people and places because they're afraid of triggering a panic attack.
- **Social anxiety disorder.** This is sometimes called social phobia. It involves fear of being judged by others or acting in a way that might cause embarrassment. It can lead to a person being afraid of common social situations.
- **Specific phobias.** A phobia is an intense fear of a specific object or situation. Common phobias involve snakes, heights or flying. Some phobias may cause people to avoid everyday situations.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder.** This disorder involves extreme worry, even if there is little or nothing to provoke the anxiety. Friends and family might call a person with generalized anxiety disorder a "worry wart."
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** A person may experience PTSD after seeing or living through a trauma.

This disorder includes thoughts you can't get rid of, flashbacks or nightmares. A person may avoid things and situations linked with the trauma.

How do I know if I need help managing my anxiety?

It's normal to have some anxiety. But how do you know if you could use a little help? If your anxiety gets in the way of living the life you want, you may want to seek help. Ask yourself if your worries:

- Keep you from going about your routine
- Prevent you from reaching your goals
- Leave you feeling overwhelmed

It's a good idea for everyone to build skills to help manage stress and worry. If you notice your anxiety prevents you from living your life, there's help out there. A counselor or therapist can help you develop skills to better manage your anxiety and stress.

How can I reduce my anxiety?

There are many treatments and self-help tools to help manage anxiety and fear. Treatment with a therapist with or without medication can make a big difference. Other healthy habits can help combat anxiety, such as exercise and meditation.

Lots of people struggle with anxiety. Many never ask for help. But you don't have to let anxiety control you.

You're not alone. Treatment is available and it can really help. Anxiety shouldn't keep you from living your life.

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