

Seeking help for anxiety



What the fact sheet covers:

- Why seek help for anxiety?
- Who to talk to
- Treatment available

It's important to get treatment for anxiety

Living with an anxiety disorder can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Getting help early means you can start to get relief and recover sooner. There are many professionals who treat all kinds of anxiety.

There is a wide range of effective treatments for anxiety, from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and e-mental health tools to relaxation techniques and medications. There are also lots of things you can do to help yourself. Often it's a combination of things that help us get better, such as:

- A well-informed health professional you feel comfortable talking to
- The right psychological and medical therapies
- Support from family and friends

- Exercising and healthy eating
- Learning ways to manage challenges and stress, such as structured problem solving, relaxation strategies (eg. meditation and yoga).

How do I know it's anxiety?

Physical signs of anxiety are part of the fight or flight response, which is a normal and necessary inbuilt response designed to protect us from sources of danger and help us survive. For example, let's say you're on a bush walk and run into a venomous animal, our brain becomes aware of the danger from messages from our sensory organs (eyes, ears, etc.). This releases hormones that activate the flight or fight response, and we may experience physical sensations such as increased heart rate, sweating, hyperventilation, or muscle tension. This prepares us to attack (fight) or run away (flight) from the source of danger and is generally an adaptive response. In addition, the





fight or flight response can be caused by certain substances (e.g. stimulants, corticosteroids) or medical conditions (e.g. Cushing's syndrome). Anxiety only becomes a problem when:

- The fight-or-flight response is switched on when we don't want it to be and/or,
- The intensity of the response is out of proportion to the actual danger and/or,
- It interferes with our social and occupational functioning.

If any of these above criteria apply, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder and may consider seeking help for it.

Who can provide help for anxiety?

As well as your GP, there are other health professionals who can help with anxiety, including:

- Psychologists
- Psychiatrists
- Counsellors
- School counsellors
- social workers and occupational therapists trained in mental health
- Mental health nurses
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers trained in mental health.

What type of treatment is available?

There are three broad categories of treatment

for anxiety:

- Psychological treatments
- Physical treatments (medications)
- Self-help and alternative therapies.

Psychological therapies are the most effective way to treat and prevent the recurrence of most types of anxiety. Depending on the type of anxiety, selfhelp and alternative therapies can also be helpful. They can be used alone or combined with physical and psychological treatments.

A thorough assessment by your doctor is needed to decide on the best combination of treatments for you.

Psychological treatments

Psychological treatments can be one-on-one, group-based or online interactions.

Some psychological treatments can help us change habits in the way we think, and cope better with life's challenges. They can help us address the reasons behind our anxiety, and also prevent anxiety from returning.

There are a wide range of psychological treatments for anxiety, including:

- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy (behaviour therapy). To date, CBT has the highest evidence base compared to other psychological therapies and is generally recommended as a first line intervention.



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- Interpersonal therapy (IPT)
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

Some of the above treatments can be accessed online. Psychological treatments for children and adolescents with anxiety disorders should ideally involve parents. Evidence-based online treatments can be as effective as face-to-face treatments. These online treatments are often referred to as e-mental health programs.

Please note that psychological treatments for children and adolescents with anxiety disorders should ideally involve parents.

Physical treatments

It's important to know that not all anxiety needs medication. Many people respond well to lifestyle changes and psychological treatments.

Your doctor should undertake a thorough health check before deciding whether medication is a good option for you. Taking medication for anxiety must be supervised by a doctor. If medication is prescribed as part of your treatment, your doctor should explain the reason for choosing the medication they've prescribed.

Your doctor will:

- Discuss the risks and benefits, side effects, and how regularly you need check-ups
- Advise what treatments can work together with the medication, such as psychotherapy, lifestyle changes (e.g. exercise) and other support options.

Antidepressants (esp. SSRIs and SNRIs) are usually considered as a first line pharmacological intervention. Other potentially useful pharmacological interventions include:

1. Benzodiazepines (usually given as a 2nd or 3rd line due to abuse / tolerance potential)
2. Anticonvulsants (pregabalin / gabapentin)
3. Atypical antipsychotics (as an adjunct to SSRIs / SNRIs)
4. Buspirone (some evidence base for GAD, but not other anxiety disorders)
5. Beta-blockers (some evidence base for Social Anxiety, but not other anxiety disorders).

Anti-anxiety medications are used for very severe anxiety in anxiety types such as panic disorder, generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), and social phobia. Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines, can:

- Be addictive
- Become ineffective over time
- Have other side effects such as headaches, dizziness and memory loss.

Anti-anxiety medications are not recommended for long-term use.



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Self-help and alternative therapies

There are a wide range of self-help measures and therapies that can be useful for anxiety. It's good to know that there are things you can do for yourself to feel better.

Self-help and complementary therapies that may be useful for anxiety include:

- Exercise
- Good nutrition
- Meditation
- De-arousal strategies
- Relaxation and breathing techniques
- Yoga
- Alcohol and drug avoidance.

Different types of anxiety respond to different kinds of treatments. Severe anxiety may not respond to self-help and alternative therapies alone. These can be valuable adjuncts to psychological and physical treatments.

e-mental health programs

e-mental health programs can be used in conjunction with a mental health professional or as a stand-alone option. e-mental health programs (also called 'e-therapies' or 'online therapies') are online mental health treatment and support services. You can access them on the internet using your smartphone, tablet or computer. The programs can help people experiencing mild-to-moderate depression or anxiety.

Some e-mental health tools, such as myCompass developed by the Black Dog Institute, have been found to be as effective in treating mild-to-moderate anxiety as face-to-face therapies. e-mental health treatments are based on face-to-face therapy, positive psychology and behavioural activation. These therapies mainly focus on reframing thoughts and changing behaviour.

Key points to remember

- Lots of professionals can help you with anxiety
- There are many types of treatments for anxiety, and you can get better
- Many people who have had anxiety have been able to seek help and live active, fulfilling lives



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