



Anxiety and Related Disorders

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILIES

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Anxiety disorders are Real

They are medical conditions that affect more than 40 million Americans, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Anxiety disorders can also cause severe symptoms. For some people, these symptoms make normal life nearly impossible.

But, with good care, most people with anxiety disorders can overcome them.





What are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety is a normal part of life. But anxiety disorders are different from everyday worries. They are chronic medical disorders that cause severe and irrational worry, tension, fear, or dread. Without treatment, they can grow to overwhelm every aspect of daily life.

- Anxiety and related disorders include these common types:
- Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Panic disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Social anxiety disorder (SAD, also called social phobia)

While each disorder has distinct features, they are bound together by a common fact: all are highly treatable. If you are one of the many people suffering from an anxiety disorder, take heart. You can be optimistic about finding relief. With treatment, you can overcome your anxiety disorder — and live a healthier, fuller life.

What are the symptoms of anxiety disorders?

Anxiety and related disorders have different patterns of symptoms.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

People with GAD feel a steady tension that they can't control. They may worry constantly, even when there is no obvious reason. Tension and worry can cause these symptoms:

- Restlessness or feeling “on edge”
- Fatigue and trouble concentrating
- Headaches and muscle tension
- Trembling, sweating, and hot flashes
- Feeling dizzy or out of breath
- Trouble falling asleep or sleeping through the night

“I worry about everything and nothing — and I can never really relax. I have a lot of trouble sleeping, too. Sometimes I can barely drag myself to work.”

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

People with OCD suffer from one or both of the following symptoms:

- Persistent, unwelcome thoughts (obsessions)
- Urgent need to repeat certain ritual behaviors (compulsions)

People with OCD realize that their thoughts and impulses aren't normal. They try to ignore them. They may try to hide them from other people. But despite their efforts, people with OCD remain in the grip of their obsessions and compulsions. Eventually, the thoughts and actions that stem from OCD can overwhelm daily life.

“I know these routines — the double-checking, the counting — aren't normal. But I can't stop them. And now they're taking over my whole life.”

Panic disorder

The core symptom of panic disorder is a panic attack. A panic attack is a sudden sense of overwhelming fear. It can occur seemingly without reason and bring on extreme emotions and physical signs, such as:

- Pounding heart, chest pain, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, dizziness
- Feeling unreal or disconnected
- Fear of having a heart attack or “going crazy”

For some people, a panic attack is a one-time event. But panic disorder usually means having 2 or more attacks — and constantly fearing another.

“They come out of the blue — these intense surges of fear. My heart pounds and I start shaking. I dread it happening again, and I avoid places where I had one before.”

What causes anxiety disorders?

Scientists believe that many factors may combine to cause anxiety disorders. Here are a few of the most likely:

- **Brain chemistry.** Brain chemistry is almost certainly a factor in anxiety disorders. How do we know? Symptoms are often relieved by medications that alter levels of chemicals in the brain.
- **Life experiences.** Exposure to abuse, violence, or poverty may increase the likelihood of getting these illnesses.
- **Family history (genetics).** Studies show that anxiety disorders run in families. This is probably due mostly to genetics. Identical twins are more likely to share an anxiety disorder than twins who are not identical. Anxiety disorders can begin in childhood. If you are a parent, watch your children for symptoms so they can be treated early.
- **Learned behaviors and thinking patterns.** People with low self-esteem and poor coping skills may be prone to anxiety disorders.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD can happen to someone who has experienced or witnessed a trauma like war, rape, abuse, or violent crime. Other experiences can also lead to PTSD, such as serious accidents, natural disasters, or the sudden death of a loved one.

People with PTSD have repeated and frightening thoughts and memories of the trauma. They may be depressed. They may feel emotionally numb, especially toward people they were once close to. They may feel irritable and be more aggressive than they used to be. In severe cases, people with PTSD may have trouble working or socializing.

“They said that time would heal me. Not in my case. I try not to think or talk about it, but the memory floods over me nearly every day.”

Social anxiety disorder (SAD, also called social phobia)

People with SAD feel overwhelming anxiety in everyday social situations. They have an intense fear of being judged by others or being embarrassed by their own actions.

For some people, anxiety is linked to one type of situation, such as public speaking. For others, the fear is far broader and causes symptoms almost any time they're around others. Many people with this illness have a hard time making and keeping friends.

“Talking with anyone except my family was nerve-racking. Speaking in class was out of the question. And if I can't hold a conversation, how can I have friends?”



Other conditions that may co-exist with anxiety disorders

People with anxiety disorders often have other mental health problems as well. A person with an anxiety disorder may also have:

- Depression
- Another anxiety disorder
- Substance abuse

If you have one of these problems, you'll need to treat it as well.

How are anxiety disorders diagnosed?

Doctors use several different tools to learn about conditions and make a diagnosis:

- **Questionnaires.** Your doctor may use questionnaires (forms) to check for anxiety and other mental health problems. The questionnaires ask about your symptoms, stress, coping style, and support system.
- **Medical history.** Your doctor asks about your past and present illnesses and your family history.
- **Physical exam.** An exam helps your doctor know if your symptoms come from something other than an anxiety disorder.
- **Guidelines for diagnosis.** Your doctor compares your information to standard medical definitions for mental health disorders.

How are anxiety disorders treated?

You have several options for treatment. Your doctor or other healthcare provider will work with you to create a treatment plan that fits your needs. It may include a coordinated team approach with counseling, medication, care management, or a combination of the three.

Although these treatments may not cure your anxiety disorder, they can help relieve your symptoms. And as your symptoms ease, your health improves. It can take some time and several visits to find the right treatments, but it's worth the effort to feel better.

There are also some basic steps you can take to manage your condition and feel better. These include regular exercise, a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, and others — see page 11.

Counseling

Also called psychotherapy or “talk therapy,” counseling can help you understand your problems and develop ways to work through them.

What to expect...

if you choose this type of treatment

- There are different types of counseling, each with a special focus. For example, counseling may focus on changing your thinking patterns. It can also teach new ways to help you cope. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) combines these strategies to help you unlearn old patterns and adopt healthier thoughts and reactions.
- Counseling is geared to the person's situation and development. For example, counseling for children may include play therapy or involve the family. Counseling for an elderly person may include screening for conditions that come on with age, or involve family and caregivers.
- A key to successful counseling is finding a counselor you feel comfortable with. Counseling is a partnership that requires trust.
- Keep in mind that although counseling can be short-term, it often takes time to work.

What to do...

to self-manage this part of treatment

- Talk with your doctor about the kind of therapy you may want to pursue. Shop around until you find a counselor you “click” with.
- To learn more about CBT, check out these books:
 - *The Cognitive Behavioral Workbook for Anxiety: A Step-by-Step Program*, by William Knaus, EdD
 - *The Anxiety and Worry Workbook: The Cognitive Behavioral Solution*, by David Clark, PhD, and Aaron Beck, MD
- Be consistent with counseling. Stay focused on the goals you set with your counselor.
- Follow your doctor's directions. Complete any assignments you're given. Ask for help from family and friends when you need it. Behavior change is hard, but it's worth it.

Care Management

Care management uses a team approach to coordinate mental health treatment with other healthcare needs. You and your family are important members of the team and take an active role in your care.

What to expect...

if you choose this type of treatment

Your doctor will lead a team that includes you and various other team members, depending on your needs.

- A care manager keeps in touch with you, gives you information, and helps to resolve problems.
- A psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse can consult with your doctor on medications and treatment.
- A mental health provider can provide counseling.
- NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness) — a consumer support organization — offers free information, education, and support.

What to do...

to self-manage this part of treatment

- Talk to your care manager about the kind of support you might find most helpful. That will help your care manager know how to best support you and your family throughout your treatment.



Thoughts of suicide

Anxiety symptoms can lead a person to think of ending it all. These thoughts are dangerous and can put you and your family at risk. If you have thoughts like these while you are being treated for an anxiety disorder, be sure to contact your doctor right away. Effective treatment can help you see the value of life clearly again.

No matter what your treatment plan —

Self-management is central.

The most important factor in your recovery is self-management. Self-management means doing your part to keep up with treatment and stay in touch with your healthcare team. It also means rebuilding your confidence by staying active in daily routines.

In addition to medication or other treatment, you can take some simple actions to help yourself recover. See page 8 for a self-management action plan.

Medication

Several different types of medications are used to treat these disorders. If one type isn't working, remember that there are options. Working with your doctor, you can find the best medication and dosage for you.

What to expect...

if you choose this type of treatment

- During the first few months of treatment, your doctor may schedule several follow-up visits to see how you're doing and adjust your medication if necessary.
- Every person has unique chemistry, and it can take time to find the right medication for you. If the first medication you try doesn't relieve your symptoms, don't be discouraged. There are other alternatives. This can be a frustrating process, but your doctors can help.
- There are several types of medications for anxiety disorders. The most common are:
 - **Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).** These can be taken daily to control the symptoms of anxiety disorders. They may take a few weeks to start working, and sticking with treatment greatly improves your chances of feeling better. Side effects are mild and can include headache, nausea, sleep problems, and agitation.
 - **Benzodiazepines.** These control the physical symptoms of anxiety disorders immediately and are taken only during an anxiety attack. They can become habit-forming, especially if you don't take them as directed. Side effects include drowsiness and dizziness.
- **Anxiety medications can interact with other medications.** Give your doctor a list of all medications you're taking — including over-the-counter drugs, supplements, and vitamins.

What to do...

to self-manage this part of treatment

- Take your medication exactly as prescribed. Don't take too much, and don't share your medications with others.
- Never stop taking your medication without first talking to your doctor.
- Keep all follow-up appointments with your doctor.
- If you have questions or concerns about your medication or its side effects, call your doctor or care manager.

What about anxiety and related disorders in children and teens?

Do you think anxiety disorders only happen to adults? Think again. According to estimates, anxiety disorders affect 1 in 8 children and 1 in 12 teens. Unfortunately, it's often overlooked or misunderstood. Myths about anxiety in kids often mean that they don't get the help they need.

If you're worried about your child or teen...

- **Watch for signs of anxiety.** For the most part, symptoms in kids are the same as in adults (see pages 4 and 5). In children and adolescents, avoiding social situations (not wanting to “play” or join in with friends) can be a sign of an anxiety disorder. Complaining about body pain, stomachaches, or headaches can also be a sign. These things don't always mean a child has an anxiety disorder — but they can help you monitor your child's behavior. If these signs are severe or go on for a long time, the chance of an anxiety disorder increases.
- **Check in with a doctor if you notice any mental, behavioral, or emotional changes that worry you.** Anxiety is a normal part of childhood. But if you can't comfort your child, or if your child starts avoiding certain places or activities, talk to a doctor. Anxiety is serious AND highly treatable for children. When in doubt, seek professional help.
- **If your child is diagnosed with anxiety, learn as much as you can.** Good information will help you make good decisions for your child's treatment. Should you see a specialist in childhood mental health? Should medication be part of treatment? When is the right time for therapy? What can you and your family do to help your child recover? Talk to your child's doctor, and see the resources on page 12.



MYTH. “Emotional and behavioral problems are a normal part of growing up.”

TRUTH. Not always. Sometimes, changes in moods and behavior are signs of anxiety. Don't be too quick to dismiss them as part of an “awkward phase.”

MYTH. “Anxiety in children and teens isn't that big a deal. They'll get over it.”

TRUTH. Although some people recover on their own, not treating anxiety is a big risk. Research shows that untreated children tend to struggle in school and miss out on sleepovers, parties, and other social events. Kids with anxiety disorders are also more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol than others.

MYTH. “I should help my child avoid stressors as much as possible.”

TRUTH. It's more helpful to support your child through stressful situations than to avoid them. Recognize and praise small accomplishments, and don't punish mistakes or lack of progress.

MYTH. “There's not much you can do for a kid with an anxiety disorder.”

TRUTH. Most kids need professional guidance to overcome an anxiety disorder. Effective treatment is usually a combination of medication and counseling. Care management can also be helpful. The care team will customize a treatment plan to best help your child.



Family or friend? Here's what you can do

It's hard to see someone you care about struggling with an anxiety disorder. What can you do? Here are a few ideas.

Where can I learn more ABOUT ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Ask your doctor about support groups and other resources in your area.

Books

- *Extinguishing Anxiety: Whole Brain Strategies to Relieve Fear and Stress*, by Catherine Pittman, PhD, and Elizabeth Karle, MLIS
- *Stop Obsessing! How to Overcome Your Obsessions and Compulsions*, by Edna Foa, PhD and Reid Wilson, PhD
- *Facing Panic: Self-Help for People with Panic Attacks*, by Reid Wilson, PhD
- *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook: A Guide to Healing, Recovery, and Growth*, by Glenn Schiraldi, PhD
- *Triumph Over Shyness: Conquering Social Anxiety Disorder*, by Murray Stein, MD, MPH, and John Walker, PhD

DO...

- **Remind yourself that anxiety disorders are medical conditions**, not just character flaws or everyday worries and fears. Know that your loved one can't just "get over it."
- **Encourage your loved one to get proper treatment.** Drive them to the doctor, if necessary.
- **Listen and be patient.** Pay attention to your loved one's feelings. Stay calm, even when your loved one is anxious. Remember that no one has anxiety on purpose and that recovery takes time.
- **Support and celebrate recovery.** Encourage your loved one to stay active. Keep inviting them to gatherings and events. Applaud their efforts and milestones toward recovery.
- **Take care of your own emotional and physical health.** Feeling dragged down by your loved one's anxiety? Think about your natural way of seeking support, and follow it. It may help to get counseling, join a support group, or discuss your feelings with friends.
- **Understand the disorder.** For example, if your loved one has panic attacks, know that they are real physical experiences. Stay calm and talk to the person's doctor about what you should do.

DON'T

- **Don't take your loved one's anxiety personally.** You didn't cause it. You can't cure it. If your loved one says something hurtful, keep in mind that they're suffering. They're prone to saying things they don't truly mean.
- **Don't ignore remarks about suicide or signs of worsening anxiety.** Help your loved one by calling a doctor for advice.
- **Don't try to nag someone into feeling better.** The more you tell someone what they should be doing, the worse they'll feel. Instead, give affection, encouragement, and compliments.
- **Don't let your loved one's illness consume you.** No one will be helped if you become overwhelmed. Respect and value your own mental health first. You'll be a good model.

Internet Resources

Intermountain Healthcare's Mental Health Online Center: [intermountainhealthcare.org/services/behavioral-health](https://www.intermountainhealthcare.org/services/behavioral-health)

National Association on Mental Illness: [nami.org](https://www.nami.org)

Anxiety and Depression Association of America: [adaa.org](https://www.adaa.org)

National Institute of Mental Health: [nimh.nih.gov](https://www.nimh.nih.gov)

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: [aacap.org](https://www.aacap.org)

Self-management action plan

Your doctor and others can help you recover, but you're in charge of the process. After all, only you can make decisions about your treatment, follow through on your plan, and know what's working for you.

This is self-management — and experts agree that it's a vital part of successful treatment for anxiety disorders. For different areas of your life, choose realistic goals that match your natural "style" and personality. Work on only one goal at a time, and reward yourself for any progress you make.

• Develop your treatment plan

Get good information from your doctor and other trusted sources. Keep in mind that mental health treatment isn't "one size fits all." With your doctor, decide on a plan that fits your unique situation. Example goals: Take your medication. Participate in counseling and care management. Keep appointments. Call your doctor with questions.

My Goal: _____

• Set goals for healthy living

Finding balance in your life speeds your recovery. It also paves the way for happier, healthier times ahead. Set goals to make sure your whole life is in balance:

– **Relationships.** Connect to family and friends. Positive social support reduces anxiety and stress. Example goals: Phone a friend every day. Attend social events. Volunteer.

My Goal: _____

– **Exercise.** Elevate your mood and reduce stress and anxiety by exercising regularly. Example goals: Walk every day. Take the stairs. Ride your bike.

My Goal: _____

– **Nutrition and sleep.** Mind and body go hand in hand. Example goals: Drink 8 glasses of water each day. Eat 5 to 10 fruits and vegetables daily. Get 8 hours of sleep each night.

My Goal: _____

– **Recreation and renewal.** Commit to having fun and soothing your spirit. Example goals: Do your hobby. Listen to music. Attend religious or cultural events. Write in a journal. Meditate.

My Goal: _____

• Stick to your treatment

Give treatment a chance to work. Take any medication as directed. Keep your appointments. Talk to your doctor if you don't see good results — you can always adjust your plan.

• Celebrate your recovery

Reward yourself for meeting your "healthy living" goals. Celebrate the milestones in your recovery. Did you sleep well through the night? Go a few hours without obsessing? Face down one of your fears? Congratulate yourself! Your work is paying off.

Remember... If you feel your treatment plan isn't working, don't just abandon it. Talk to your doctor. Most people with anxiety disorders **can** reduce their fears and find joy. With time and help, you can, too!

To find this booklet and other patient education, go to:
intermountainhealth.org



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