

FACT SHEET #3

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

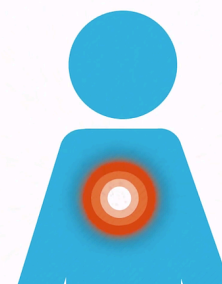
"Living with anxiety is like being followed by a voice. It knows all of your insecurities, all of your worries, all of your fear. It is the loudest voice in the room and eventually the only voice you can hear."

Anonymous

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

We all feel anxious from time to time. When we are under pressure or experiencing a difficult time in our life, such as when giving an important presentation, having a difficult conversation, or being under financial strain - feeling stressed and worried are expected and typical responses. Usually, feeling anxious passes once the stressful situation has passed.

Anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't subside.



Anxiety is a serious mental illness that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life. Anxious feelings persist intensely beyond the stressful event or are associated with life events that would not reasonably be expected to be related to such intense feelings of anxiety.

For a person experiencing anxiety, these anxious feelings are overwhelming and are not able to be managed effectively.

TYPES OF ANXIETY

There are many different types of anxiety. Types of anxiety are defined by its specific set of signs and symptoms.

The most common anxiety disorders are Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Phobias, Panic Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

GENERALISED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD)

People with GAD feel anxious and worried most of the time. These anxious feelings are not just in response to a specific stressful event, or one event in particular – but have a pervasive and persist presence, and interfere with typical expectations of day-to-day functioning. A person with anxiety finds it difficult to control these worries and constantly feel that something terrible is going to happen.

OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD)

OCD is the persistent recurring of a thought, often irrational, that leads to a pattern of unhealthy behaviour.

For example, the obsessive thought “I may not have locked the door” may lead to repeated checking of the door which significantly hampers or prevents a person from leaving their house. This repeated checking alleviates the distress caused by the thought and reinforces the behaviour.

People with OCD often feel a deep sense of shame and embarrassment about their behaviour because they are fully aware of its irrationality, but cannot overcome it.

PHOBIAS

Phobias are a set of anxiety disorders that are characterised by an intense fear in relation to a very particular situation or object. This fear causes the person to avoid that situation or object, or have an intensely strong anxiety reaction (i.e., a range of physical and psychological symptoms such as excessive perspiration, trembling, nausea, and diarrhoea) to it when it is experienced or encountered.

Phobias are classified into the following categories:

Social Phobia

An intense fear of being criticised, embarrassed or humiliated in public and feeling consumed by how they appear to others.

Medical/Health Phobia

Fear in relation to medical procedures, injuries or illness such as getting an injection, seeing blood or a broken limb.

Situation Phobia

Fear of being in a certain situation such as driving, exams, a closed-in space or flying on a plane.

Natural Environment Phobia

Fear in relation to the natural environment such as the ocean or heights.

Animal Phobia

Fear in relation to animals or insects.

Other Phobia

Any other fear in relation to any specific event, behaviour, situation or thing.

PANIC DISORDER

Panic disorder is characterised by recurrent, disabling and unexpected panic attacks. Panic attacks are an intense and overwhelming feeling of anxiety that manifests in shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, excessive perspiration and the belief that they are going to die.

Panic attacks last between 10-30 minutes and are exhausting for the sufferer. Panic attacks can occur multiple times throughout a single day or from time-to-time.



POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Following a significantly traumatic experience – either as a once-off event or through long term exposure, a person can develop PTSD.

Examples of a traumatic experience could be involvement in a natural disaster, war, or an accident. Trauma can also be experienced through long term exposure to abuse, and developed in certain professions such as the defence and emergency services.

PTSD is the experience of intense fear, helplessness and horror.

PTSD often involves the constant rumination, reliving and flashbacks to the trauma that was experienced. People with PTSD are often overly alert, emotional or emotionally detached and feel irritable and unable to focus.

INCIDENCE OF ANXIETY

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia.

On average, 1 in 4 people (1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men), will experience anxiety at some stage in their life.

In any given 12-month period, over 2 million Australians experience anxiety.



DIAGNOSING ANXIETY

It can be difficult to know if someone has anxiety. GPs, psychologists and psychiatrists are the only professionals qualified to provide a diagnosis of anxiety.

Symptoms often develop and intensify gradually over time. Whilst there are many different types of anxiety with particular indicators of each, generally, the signs and symptoms of anxiety include:

- Feeling very worried and anxious most of the time.
- Not being able to successfully control the feelings of anxiety.
- Deliberating on thoughts that may seem trivial to others.
- Constantly worrying and imagining the worst.
- Feeling overwhelmed or frightened by sudden feelings of intense panic.
- Finding it difficult to think clearly.
- Avoiding situations that cause anxiety.
- Experiencing sleeplessness, nightmares or flashbacks.
- Feeling physical symptoms such as a racing heart, upset stomach, sweaty hands or shaking body.
- Engaging in rituals or routines to relieve the feelings of anxiety.

For anxiety to be diagnosed, these sign and symptoms must have a disabling effect on a person's life and be present for six months or longer.

CAUSES OF ANXIETY

We know that the cause of anxiety can be due to one factor or a combination of factors. These factors are:

1. Genetics – so having a family history of anxiety.
2. A specific stressful life event.
3. Experiencing a physical health problem.
4. Abusing substances.
5. Having specific personality characteristics such as being a perfectionist or having low self-esteem.

TREATMENT FOR ANXIETY

Most people with anxiety can effectively manage their anxiety and lead productive and fulfilling lives. Whilst the type of treatment for anxiety will depend on the anxiety and severity of anxiety being treated, treatment approaches fall into two categories - psychological and medical.

Psychological

Milder forms of anxiety can often be managed with some lifestyle changes and development of coping skills. This is typically through using cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). This is a structured evidence-based approach which recognises that the way we think and feel drives the way we act. As such, CBT involves exploring unhelpful thinking patterns related to the anxiety, and working to develop more helpful thinking patterns.

Medical

More moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety may require more intensive CBT and/or medication. This medication – which is typically either depression medication (also clinically shown to work with people experiencing anxiety) or benzodiazepines (e.g., sleeping pills) will sometimes be prescribed to alleviate severe symptoms of anxiety.

If you or someone you know needs help contact **TIACS** on 0488 846 988 or your organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), your GP or call: **LifeLine** on 13 11 14, **Kids Helpline** on 1800 551 800, **MensLine Australia** on 1300 789 978 or the **Suicide Call Back Service** on 1300 659 467.