

Anxiety

How do I know I'm anxious?

People experience anxiety in many different ways. Some people are prone to feeling stressed and rush around busily every day. Others might be very disabled by their anxiety, feeling so fearful that it is hard for them to leave their home. There are many different types of anxiety problems. What is common to most types of anxiety are four main components: (1) the emotional response (the feeling of anxiety), (2) the physical response (bodily reactions), (3) worrisome thoughts, and (4) changes in behaviour, such as avoidance of the feared situation(s).

The feeling of anxiety is necessary for our everyday survival. If we did not have this feeling then we would find it difficult to cope with real threats in our environment. Just imagine if you walked out onto the road and suddenly noticed a car coming. You would need some kind of "alarm system" so that you could protect yourself. Anxiety is a tool our body uses to warn us of potential danger and alert our bodies to spring into action and defend ourselves.

When we are faced with a threat we need to be able to fight, or run away from it. A system in our bodies called the "fight or flight" response is activated at such times. This produces many physical changes so that we can defend ourselves. The primary aim of this response is to pump blood to the major muscles so that they are "primed" for action. This is why people who feel anxious often experience sensations such as increased heart rate, over breathing, muscle tension, headaches, sweating, shaking, wobbly legs, tingling limbs, and nausea. These are just some of the sensations associated with the fight or flight response.

Within reason, this response is normal and necessary. However, anxiety can become a problem when the threat in the environment is not obvious or if the strength of the response to the threat is not compatible with the severity of the threat. It is also a problem if the physical feelings associated with anxiety are interpreted as harmful and viewed by the person experiencing anxiety as an indication of a serious physical problem. When this occurs, people can experience very distressing feelings of "panic". Anxiety is definitely a problem if it is prolonged and interferes with a person's life.

Common types of anxiety include:

- A fear of something specific – for example a phobia of heights, blood, or spiders
- A fear of humiliating or embarrassing oneself in public or a fear of having someone scrutinise and criticise you
- A fear of serious physical illness, or panic about something harmful happening to oneself or loved ones. This could include a fear of having a heart attack or going crazy or a fear of contamination
- A fear of being trapped, or a fear of not being able to escape from situations which are considered to be dangerous.
- Ongoing thoughts or feelings associated with a traumatic life threatening event that occurred in the past
- General worry and a constant feeling of uneasiness and difficulty relaxing
- A constant preoccupation with something that is very stressful.
- Performance of certain unusual behaviours, perhaps rituals, to help alleviate the anxiety.

Not everyone suffering from anxiety experiences all of these different types. Often the anxiety is about something specific.

What can I do if I'm feeling anxious?

The first thing you need to do is to tell yourself that because you are human it is normal to feel anxious from time to time. Everyone feels anxious at times. It is usually a healthy sign that your body is able to protect itself.

However, if it is very distressing or if it has been interfering significantly in your life, then you might benefit from discussing it with a professional. It is very common for people to need to see someone about their anxiety. Anxiety problems are very prevalent in the community. They are also usually very treatable.

One option is to see your GP, and to consider the appropriateness of medications. It is advisable to be cautious about taking medications for anxiety, however, as they are often not necessary and they can be addictive as well as having unpleasant side effects. Furthermore, there are other effective ways of learning how to cope with anxiety. A clinical psychologist, for example, can help you to overcome your worries without drugs.

What can a clinical psychologist do about my anxiety?

A clinical psychologist can help you learn practical skills for managing anxiety. The most effective approach is known as **cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)**. In essence, this approach involves helping people to (1) develop ways to change unhelpful behaviour patterns (such as developing strategies for gradually decreasing avoidance of feared situations), (2) modify unhelpful and worrisome thinking patterns, (3) learning applied relaxation techniques and (4) addressing other problems that might be contributing to feelings of anxiety. It is a relatively short term treatment approach which usually occurs over a few weeks.

If you would like any more information on anxiety and cognitive behaviour therapy, please feel free to contact us 02 9231 2522 or info@makingchanges.com.au.

Other brochures that are available include: Depression, Pain, Insomnia, Relationship difficulties