

Anxiety and Panic Disorders Guide

Anxiety Attack Symptoms: When Worry Takes Control

When Worry Takes Control

Provided by Psychology Today

[Anxiety](#) is part of the package of life. It's a natural byproduct of having a brain that is capable of such high-wire acts as considering the future. A little anxiety is good, even necessary, and a great motivator to get us to plan well and to perform ably.

Yet too much anxiety can be disabling. For millions of people, worry disrupts everyday life, restricting it to some degree or even overshadowing it entirely. An estimated 15 percent of Americans suffer from one or another of the anxiety disorders. These include generalized anxiety, specific [phobias](#), obsessive-compulsive disorder and flat-out [panic attacks](#). As a group, anxiety disorders constitute the most common disorder in the country.

How do you know whether you are worrying too much? When anxiety moves beyond an occasional wave of apprehension to become a constant and dominating force in your life, you need to take steps to curb anxiety.

Sometimes anxiety explodes in a [panic attack](#), marked by a general feeling of terror. A person engulfed in a panic attack usually experiences a racing or pounding heart, sometimes even [pain](#) or heaviness in the chest. Breathing becomes difficult. The body trembles and hands turn clammy. The person may notice tingling in their hands and feet, sometimes in their arms and legs. They may start to feel light-headed.

Victims feel out of control of their body. Many feel like they are going crazy. Panic attacks are so frightening that sufferers wonder whether they will survive the episode.

At least 5 percent of American adults experience panic attacks. Often, the attacks come out of the blue, for no apparent reason. Or they can come on when a person is coping with extreme [stress](#). Either way panic attacks can last for several minutes.

Other forms of anxiety are less dramatic but more widespread.

For some, other people are the cause of anxiety. Social anxiety creates in its sufferers the feeling that they are being watched and judged by others, even if rationally they know that this is not the case. In its milder forms, social anxiety can create extreme self-consciousness in the presence of others; but in its severe forms it can be debilitating, leading sufferers to avoid social situations altogether.

Another common form of worry is [generalized anxiety disorder](#). Sufferers are filled with questions -- negative ones -- and dwell on endless "what if's" of a situation. They feel trapped in cycles of anxiety and worry.

General anxiety doesn't typically lead to panic attacks, but it can still be incapacitating. The endless worry saps energy, destroys interest in life and prompts frequent mood swings.

It's possible that some people are born with a temperament that inclines them to anxiety. Regardless of how anxiety develops, it's possible to control it.

When Worry Takes Control continued...

"If anxiety is interfering with your work or personal life even though you tried to relax or do some stress management, at that point you should at least get a consultation by a health professional to see if there is an anxiety disorder," says Jerilyn Ross, M.A., director for the Ross Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders in Washington, D.C.

Treatment is tailored to the specific concerns that preoccupy each person. Nevertheless, there are some treatment techniques that are widely applied. Persons who are expert at treating anxiety often use a combination of approaches

Cognitive Therapy. Focuses on creating an understanding of the thought patterns that bring on worry. It helps anxiety sufferers separate unrealistic from realistic thoughts.

Behavior Therapy. Focuses on taming anxiety through control of specific ways the body overreacts to worry. One common approach is to teach controlled breathing and the relaxing of muscles that constrict with worry. Both techniques lower heart rate and [blood pressure](#).

Relaxation Training. Through a mixture of cognitive and behavior techniques, helps avert high anxiety. One approach is to think of a relaxing scene when anxiety levels start to rise.

Desensitization. Those who suffer phobias and obsessive-compulsive disorder are gradually and safely exposed to whatever is the source of their anxiety, until, over time, tolerance is built.

Medication. [Antidepressant](#) and antianxiety medications are most effective in combination with psychotherapy.

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Reviewed by [Amal Chakraborty, MD](#) on March 01, 2007

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