

## ANXIETY DISORDERS

Everybody experiences anxiety from time to time. Normal anxiety is a natural reaction that can help avoid danger and motivate a person to solve everyday problems. Anxiety varies in severity from mild uneasiness to terrifying panic attacks. It also varies in how long it lasts, from a few minutes to many years. However, normal anxiety differs from an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are more severe, long lasting and often interfere significantly with a person's life.

**Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health problem**, affecting up to 18.1% of Americans. They often co-occur with depression, with no clear indication whether or which one causes the other.

Disorder	Total %
All Anxiety Disorders	18.1
Generalized Anxiety Disorder	3.1
Panic Disorder	2.7
Phobias	8.8
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	3.5
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder	1

**Perceived threats in the environment usually cause anxiety.** Some people are more likely to react with anxiety when they feel threatened, especially women and individuals who have an overly anxious parent, a more sensitive emotional nature, experienced a difficult childhood. Anxiety disorders can also result from medical conditions (e.g., hyperthyroidism, vitamin B12 deficiency, seizures and cardiac conditions), prescription drug side effects and non-prescription drugs (e.g., caffeine, cocaine, LSD, ecstasy and speed).

Symptoms of anxiety disorders are physical, psychological and behavioral.

### Physical symptoms

- Cardiovascular: palpitations, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, flushing
- Respiratory: hyperventilation, shortness of breath
- Neurological: dizziness, headache, sweating, tingling and numbness
- Gastrointestinal: choking, dry mouth, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- Musculoskeletal: muscle aches and pains, restlessness, tremors and shaking

### Psychological symptoms

- Unrealistic and/or excessive fear and worry (about past or future events)
- Mind racing or going blank
- Decreased concentration and memory
- Indecisiveness
- Irritability, impatience and anger
- Confusion
- Restlessness, feeling 'on edge' or nervousness
- Tiredness, sleep disturbances, vivid dreams

### Behavioral Symptoms

- Avoidance of situations
- Obsessive or compulsive behavior
- Distress in social situations
- Phobic behavior

There are several types of anxiety disorders.

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder** affects 3.1% of Americans. The primary symptom is overwhelming, unfounded anxiety and worry (e.g., worry of things that may go wrong) accompanied by multiple physical and psychological symptoms that occur more days than not for at least six months. People living with GAD worry excessively about money, health, family and work – even when there are no signs of trouble.

**Panic Disorder** affects 2.7% of Americans. A person with a panic disorder typically experiences **panic attacks**, or a sudden onset of intense feelings of apprehension, fear or terror that are inappropriate for the circumstances in which it occurs. Many of the symptoms of panic attacks are physical - such as dizziness, shaking, perspiration, nausea, hyperventilation and rapid heartbeat. Once a person experiences a panic attack, they often fear another one and may avoid places where one has occurred. They may also avoid exercise or other activities with physical sensations similar to those of a panic attack.

**Phobias** affect 8.8% of Americans. A person with a phobia avoids or restricts activities because of persistent, excessive and unreasonable fear. Common phobias include agoraphobia, which involves avoidance of public situations due to fear of having a panic attack, or social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder), which involves a fear of any situation where public scrutiny is possible. Social phobia affects 6.8% of Americans, while specific phobias, where a person fears specific objects or situations such as spiders or heights affect nearly 9% of Americans.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Acute Stress Disorder** affect 3.5% of Americans. They occur after a distressing or catastrophic event that may involve threatened death or serious injury, witnessing the death or injury of others or learning about such an experience of loved ones. Feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror increase a person's likelihood of developing PTSD. A major symptom of PTSD is "re-experiencing" a trauma. This includes recurring dreams of the trauma, flashbacks, intrusive memories or disease in situations that bring back memories of the original trauma. Acute stress disorder lasts for only about one month after a traumatic event, whereas PTSD lasts longer. PTSD is common among people who have experienced abuse and who have been in combat.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** is the least common type of anxiety disorder, and affects 1% of American adults. It is a very disabling condition marked by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors accompanying feelings of anxiety. The compulsive behaviors are repetitive behaviors or mental acts that a person feels driven to perform to reduce the anxiety associated with obsessive thoughts. Common compulsions include the need to wash, check and count. Most are about fear of contamination, germs or harm. This disorder typically begins in adolescence and waxes and wanes throughout a person's life.

**Treatment works to manage anxiety.** Common interventions include talk therapy, prescription medications, exercise and relaxation methods. If you or a loved one shows signs of an anxiety disorder, seek help from your community behavioral healthcare center.

Visit [www.thenationalcouncil.org](http://www.thenationalcouncil.org) to find a community behavioral health center near you.