

FAQ

Anxiety disorders

# Frequently asked questions about anxiety disorders

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*This document was reviewed by Prof. Dr. Katharina Domschke*

# Frequently asked questions about anxiety disorders



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## 1. What are anxiety disorders?<sup>1-3</sup>

Anxiety is a normal and common emotional response to stress or perceived threat, and most people experience feelings of anxiety from time to time. In contrast, anxiety disorders are clinical conditions in which anxiety becomes intense, persistent, difficult to control, and at times disproportionate to the actual situation.

People living with anxiety disorders often experience intense worry or fear about everyday situations that interferes with daily functioning and may persist over long periods of time.

According to ICD-11, anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias, agoraphobia, selective mutism and separation anxiety disorder. Individuals may experience more than one anxiety disorder simultaneously, and anxiety disorders frequently co-occur with other mental health conditions, such as depression and substance abuse disorders.

## 2. What are the causes of anxiety disorders?<sup>1,4</sup>

The causes of anxiety disorders are complex and usually involve a combination of factors. Anyone can develop an anxiety disorder, but people who have experienced abuse, severe loss, trauma, or other adverse life events are at higher risk. Risk for anxiety disorders is also influenced by genetic factors, neurotransmitter imbalances and dysfunctional brain fear network function. In addition, certain medical conditions may play a direct role in the onset of anxiety disorders, while the challenges of coping with a chronic or serious illness can further contribute to their development.

## 3. How common are anxiety disorders?<sup>1,4</sup>

Anxiety disorders are the world's most common mental disorders, affecting 359 million people in 2021 or an estimated 4,4% of the global population. Anxiety disorders are more common in females than in males, across all ages.

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Anxiety Disorders are most common over a one-year period among people aged 18-25. In adulthood, 10-14% of the population fulfil the DSM criteria for anxiety disorder within a year.

## 4. What are the symptoms and signs of anxiety disorders?<sup>1,2,5</sup>

Anxiety disorders can affect thoughts, emotions, behaviour, and physical functioning. Common symptoms include excessive worry, restlessness, muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, and sweating.

Individuals with anxiety disorders will also avoid fearful situations or things that trigger anxiety.

The severity and course of anxiety disorders can vary across individuals; remission, relapse, and recovery are all common outcomes.

## 5. How are anxiety disorders diagnosed?<sup>6,7</sup>

Anxiety disorders are diagnosed by a qualified healthcare professional, such as a physician, particularly psychiatrist, or psychologist. The diagnosis is based on clinical assessment and can include a detailed interview covering current symptoms, their duration and severity, and the extent to which symptoms interfere with daily functioning.

Standardized diagnostic criteria from internationally recognized classification systems are used to guide diagnosis, including the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) and the International Classification of Diseases ICD-11).

In some cases, a physical examination or additional tests may be performed to rule out medical conditions or substance-related causes that can produce symptoms similar to anxiety disorders.

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## 6. What treatment options are available for anxiety disorders?<sup>2,8</sup>

The need for treatment is determined by several factors such as severity and duration, level of impact on life, and coexistence of other conditions and symptoms.

Effective treatments for anxiety disorders include psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of both.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is one of the most widely used and well-established psychotherapies, helping individuals identify and modify unhelpful thought patterns and behaviours that maintain anxiety. CBT may include techniques such as cognitive restructuring, exposure to feared situations, and skills to manage stress and emotional responses.

Medications may be prescribed when symptoms are moderate to severe, persistent, or when psychotherapy alone is insufficient. Commonly used medications include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and other antidepressants. In some cases, additional anti-anxiety medications may be used for symptom management, depending on individual needs and clinical judgment.

Lifestyle changes, stress management, relaxation techniques, and mindfulness practices can further help reduce symptoms.

## 7. What strategies can support management and quality of life in anxiety disorders?<sup>1</sup>

Quality of life can be improved by prioritising a healthy routine that includes regular physical activity, balanced nutrition, and sufficient sleep. Maintaining consistent eating and sleeping patterns can help stabilise mood and reduce anxiety symptoms, while regular exercise - even gentle activities such as walking - has been shown to support emotional regulation. Reducing or avoiding alcohol, caffeine and illicit substances including cannabis is also important, as these can exacerbate anxiety. Building strong social support networks, alongside learning practical coping strategies such as relaxation

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techniques (for example, slow breathing or progressive muscle relaxation) and mindfulness meditation, can further assist individuals in managing symptoms and promoting overall well-being.

## Lexicon<sup>6-9</sup>

**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** A form of psychotherapy that focuses on the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, includes exposure exercises and helps people develop practical strategies to manage challenges and improve well-being.

**DSM criteria (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders):** Diagnostic standards published and used to classify and diagnose mental health conditions

**ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases, 11th revision):** Providing international standards for diagnosing diseases, including mental and behavioural disorders.

**Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs):** A class of medications commonly used to treat anxiety and depression by increasing serotonin levels in the brain.

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