

What Do Stress and Anxiety Feel Like?



Stress and anxiety can produce both physical and psychological symptoms. People experience stress and anxiety differently. Common physical symptoms include:

- stomachache
- muscle tension
- headache
- rapid breathing
- fast heartbeat
- sweating
- shaking
- dizziness
- frequent urination
- change in appetite
- trouble sleeping
- diarrhea
- fatigue

In addition to physical symptoms, stress and anxiety can cause mental or emotional ones. These can include:

- feelings of impending doom
- panic or nervousness, especially in social settings
- difficulty concentrating
- irrational anger
- restlessness

Prescription medications that can make symptoms worse include:

- thyroid medications
- asthma inhalers
- diet pills

Stress- and Anxiety-Related Disorders

Stress and anxiety that occur frequently or seem out of proportion to the stressor may be signs of an anxiety disorder. An estimated 40 million Americans suffer from some type of anxiety disorder.

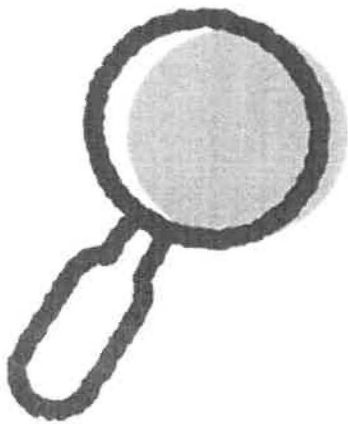
People with these disorders may feel anxious and stressed on a daily basis and for prolonged periods of time. These disorders include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)** is a common anxiety disorder that causes uncontrollable worrying. Sometimes people worry about bad things happening to them or loved ones, and at other times the person may not be able to identify any source of worry.
- **Panic disorder** is a condition that causes moments of extreme fear, a pounding heart, and shortness of breath, commonly known as panic attacks.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a condition that causes flashbacks or anxiety as the result of a traumatic experience.
- **Social phobia** is a condition that causes intense feelings of anxiety in situations that involve interacting with others.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder** is a condition that causes repetitive thoughts and the compulsion to complete certain ritual actions.

If you are having thoughts about harming yourself or others, you should seek immediate medical help. Stress and anxiety are treatable conditions and there are many resources, strategies, and treatments that can help. If you are unable to control your worries, and stress is impacting your daily life, talk to your primary care provider about ways to manage stress and anxiety.

People who have stress and anxiety over long periods of time may experience negative related health outcomes. They are more likely to develop heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and may even develop depression and panic disorder.

What Causes Stress and Anxiety?



For most people, stress and anxiety come and go. They usually occur after particular life events, but then go away.

Common Causes

Common stressors include:

- moving
- starting a new school or job
- having an illness or injury
- having a friend or family member who is ill or injured
- death of a family member or friend
- getting married
- having a baby

Drugs and Medications

Drugs that contain stimulants may make the symptoms of stress and anxiety worse. Regular use of caffeine, illicit drugs such as cocaine, and even alcohol can also make symptoms worse.

Techniques to Manage Stress and Anxiety



It's normal to experience stress and anxiety from time to time, and there are strategies you can use to make them more manageable. Pay attention to how your body and mind respond to stressful and anxiety-producing situations. Next time a stressful experience occurs, you will be able to anticipate your reaction and it may be less disruptive.

Managing Everyday Stress and Anxiety

Certain lifestyle changes can help alleviate symptoms of stress and anxiety. These techniques can be used along with medical treatments for anxiety. Techniques to reduce stress and anxiety include:

- eating a balanced, healthy diet
- limiting caffeine and alcohol consumption
- getting enough sleep
- getting regular exercise
- meditating
- scheduling time for hobbies
- keeping a diary of your feelings
- practicing deep breathing
- recognizing the factors that trigger your stress
- talking to a friend

Postponing worrying is effective because it breaks the habit of dwelling on worries in the present moment. As you develop the ability to postpone your anxious thoughts, you'll experience a greater sense of control.

Worry and anxiety self-help tip #3: Challenge negative thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more dangerous than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every negative thought as if it were fact. You may also discredit your own ability to handle life's problems, assuming you'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions.

Although cognitive distortions aren't based on reality, they're not easy to give up. Often, they're part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring - you must retrain your brain.

Start by identifying the frightening thought, being as detailed as possible about what scares or worries you. Then, instead of viewing your thoughts as facts, treat them as hypotheses you're testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and fears, you'll develop a more balanced perspective.

Stop worry by questioning the worried thought:

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

Cognitive Distortions that Lead to Anxiety and Worry

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|------------------------------------|---|
| All-or-nothing thinking | Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground ("If I fall short of perfection, I'm a total failure.") |
| Overgeneralization | Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever ("I didn't get hired for the job. I'll never get any job.") |
| The mental filter | Focusing on the negatives while filtering out all the positives. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right. |
| Diminishing the positive | Coming up with reasons why positive events don't count ("I did well on the presentation, but that was just dumb luck.") |
| Jumping to conclusions | Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader ("I can tell she secretly hates me.") or a fortune teller ("I just <i>know</i> something terrible is going to happen.") |
| Catastrophizing | Expecting the worst-case scenario to happen ("The pilot said we're in for some turbulence. The plane's going to crash!") |
| Emotional reasoning | Believing that the way you feel reflects reality ("I feel frightened right now. That must mean I'm in real physical danger.") |
| 'Shoulds' and 'should-nots' | Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn't do--and beating yourself up if you break any of the rules |
| Labeling | Labeling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings ("I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser.") |
| Personalization | Assuming responsibility for things that are outside your control ("It's my fault my son got in an accident. I should have warned him to drive carefully in the rain.") |

SELF-SOOTHE

A way to remember these skills is to think of soothing each of your
FIVE SENSES

Vision

Notice what you see, find soothing things to look at.

Notice the play of light on a clean wall. Enjoy the richness of colors in the floor tile. Look out the window and watch the grass gently blow in the breeze, the sun dancing on leaves, the graceful movement of the birds, or the smooth movement of passing cars. Close your eyes and notice the textures and light colors behind your eyelids.

Hearing

Pay attention to what you can hear around you.

Listen to beautiful or soothing music, or to invigorating and exciting music. Pay attention to sounds of nature (waves, birds, rainfall, leaves rustling). Sing to your favorite songs. Hum a soothing tune. Learn to play an instrument. Be mindful of any sounds that come your way, letting them go in one ear and out the other. Notice how sounds on the unit feel different at various times of day. Quietly notice the sounds of your own breath. See if you can hear the sound of your own circulation.

Smell

Be aware of the memories that smell can bring.

Notice the scent of your soap and shampoo while showering. Try to find brands of deodorant, lotion, and other things that have a soothing smell to you. Sit quietly for a few minutes and try to identify all of the smells that you notice. Enjoy the smell of your meals while you are in the dining room. See if you can smell each type of food individually. Savor the smell of popcorn and remember other times in your life when you have enjoyed popcorn.

Taste

Carefully savor flavors that the day brings you.

Have a good meal; enjoy your dessert; have a favorite soothing drink such as herbal tea or hot chocolate. Treat yourself to a favorite snack from the canteen. Suck on a piece of peppermint candy. Chew your favorite gum. Really taste the food you eat; eat one thing mindfully.

Touch

Find comfort in touch.

Take a bubble bath. Savor the feeling of crisp, clean sheets on the bed. Soak your feet. Soften your skin with lotion. Put a cold compress on your forehead. Brush your hair for a long time. Place your hand on a smooth, cool surface. Enjoy the feeling of a favorite piece of clothing, or clean clothes. Notice the comforting warmth of clothing that is fresh from the dryer. Experience whatever you are touching; notice touch that is soothing.

IMPROVE THE MOMENT

Sleep Hygiene

➤ **Set a schedule.**

Establish a regular sleep schedule every day of the week. Don't sleep in more than an hour, even on your days off.

➤ **Don't force yourself to sleep.**

If you haven't fallen asleep after 20 minutes in bed, get up and do something calming. Read a boring book, draw, or write in a journal. Avoid bright lights, bright screens, or anything else that might activate your body and wake you up more.

➤ **Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine.**

Consuming caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine can affect your ability to fall asleep and the quality of your sleep, even if they're used many hours earlier in the day.

➤ **Avoid napping.**

Don't nap during the day to ensure you are tired by the time night rolls around. Naps that are over an hour long or those that are later in the day are especially harmful to sleep hygiene.

➤ **Only use your bed for sleeping.**

Using your bed for reading, watching TV, or other activities will lead your body to associate your bed with these activities. If you reserve your time in bed for sleeping, your body will begin to associate your bed with sleep.

➤ **Exercise and eat well.**

Eating healthy and exercising can lead to better sleep. However, you should avoid strenuous exercise and big meals in the 2 hours before going to bed.

➤ **Sleep in a comfortable environment.**

It's important to sleep in an area that's adequately quiet, comfortable, and dark. Try using an eye mask, ear plugs, and fans if this step causes problems.

Challenging Negative Thoughts

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." – William Shakespeare

Depression, poor self-esteem, and anxiety are often the result of irrational negative thoughts. Someone who regularly receives positive feedback at work might feel that they are horrible at their job because of one criticism. Their irrational thought about job performance will dictate how they feel about themselves. Challenging irrational thoughts can help us change them.

Answer the following questions to assess your thought:

- ◆ Is there substantial evidence for my thought?

- ◆ Is there evidence *contrary* to my thought?

- ◆ Am I attempting to interpret this situation without all the evidence?

- ◆ What would a friend think about this situation?

- ◆ If I look at the situation positively, how is it different?

- ◆ Will this matter a year from now? How about five years from now?

Managing Anxiety

1. In order to release anxiety, the first step is acknowledging that it is there. Recognizing that you are having anxious thoughts allows you to detach from fear. They are merely thoughts and are not real.
2. Identify your negative thoughts and then replace them with rational ones works to deescalate the severity of our symptoms.
3. Accept your anxiety rather than trying to fight it. Acceptance can also mean it's time to look inward and see what areas in your life might be fueling the anxiety.
4. Spending your days idle without structure will cause you to over-magnify your negative thoughts. The mind is not built to be idle and unstructured.
5. Don't assume that what you are thinking is actually true. Anxiety causes catastrophic thinking which means your thoughts are most likely irrational and out of proportion to reality in the moment. Just because you are having a thought does not mean you have to pay attention to it. Thoughts are random and sometimes insignificant.
6. Do not avoid anxiety provoking activities/places. Withdrawing from people and isolating in your home is also not a good idea. The more you keep the anxiety bottled up and unexpressed, the worse it gets.
7. Do not self-medicate with mood altering substances.
8. Do not judge yourself for experiencing anxiety. Strong, high functioning people experience anxiety.
9. Socialize. Spend time with people who are uplifting. By putting your focus on someone else, it engages your mind with a new activity. It serves a second purpose as well: giving you perspective beyond yourself. An anxious thought can become your whole life.
10. Nature can be a refuge. It is calming and helps you connect to something larger than yourself. Nature can remind us that there is something greater than ourselves out there, which can create a feeling of acceptance.

