

# Live Well, Work Well

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## Mental Health: Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders commonly occur in conjunction with other mental or physical illnesses, last at least six months and can get worse without treatment. There are six types of anxiety disorders: panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social phobia, specific phobia and generalized anxiety disorder.

### **Panic Disorder**

This condition is characterized by sudden attacks of terror—known as panic attacks—which are usually accompanied by a pounding heart, sweating, dizziness and/or weakness. During these attacks, sufferers may flush or feel chilled, their hands may tingle or feel numb and nausea or chest pain may occur. Panic attacks usually produce a sense of unreality, a fear of impending doom or a fear of losing control. They can occur at any time—even during sleep. About one-third of people who experience panic attacks become so fearful that they refuse to leave home. When the condition progresses this far, it is called agoraphobia—a fear of open spaces.

### **Obsessive-compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

OCD sufferers have persistent, upsetting thoughts or obsessions, and use rituals to control the anxiety these thoughts produce. Most often, the rituals end up controlling the person with OCD. For example, if someone is obsessed with germs and dirt, he or she may develop a compulsion for excessive hand washing.

### **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

PTSD develops after a traumatic event or experience that involved physical harm or the threat of it. PTSD is common in war veterans, but it can result from a variety of traumatic incidents, such as kidnapping, abuse or a car accident. People with PTSD may startle easily, become emotionally numb (especially to people with whom they used to be close), lose interest in things they used to enjoy, and become irritable, aggressive or violent. They avoid situations which remind them of the original incident, and anniversaries of the incident are usually very difficult.

### **Social Phobia**

Also called social anxiety disorder, social phobia is diagnosed when individuals become overwhelmingly anxious and excessively self-conscious in everyday social situations. People with this phobia have an intense, persistent and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and of doing things that will embarrass them. They may worry for days or even weeks before a dreaded situation. Many with social phobia realize that their fear is unwarranted, but are still unable to overcome it.

### **Specific Phobias**

A specific phobia is an intense, irrational fear of something that actually poses little or no threat—such as heights, escalators, dogs, spiders, closed-in places or water. Like social phobia, sufferers understand that these fears are irrational, but feel powerless to stop them. The causes of these phobias are not well understood, but symptoms usually appear in childhood or adolescence and continue into adulthood.

### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**

People with GAD go through the day filled with exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to worry

about. GAD is diagnosed when a person worries excessively about a variety of everyday problems for at least 6 months. Physical symptoms accompanying this condition include fatigue, headaches, irritability, nausea, frequent urination and hot flashes.

## Diagnosis and Treatment

In general, anxiety disorders are treated with medication, specific types of psychotherapy or both. Before treatment begins, a doctor must conduct a careful diagnostic evaluation to determine whether a person's symptoms are caused by an anxiety disorder or a physical problem. Sometimes alcoholism, depression or other coexisting conditions have such a strong effect on the individual that treating the anxiety disorder must wait until those conditions are brought under control.

Those with anxiety disorders usually try several different treatments or combinations of treatment before finding the one that works for them.

## How to Get Help

If you think you have an anxiety disorder, the first step to take is to visit your physician. He or she can determine if your symptoms are caused by an anxiety disorder, another medical condition or both. If an anxiety disorder is diagnosed, you will be referred to a mental health professional.

For more information, contact the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) at [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov) or 866-615-NIMH (6464).

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