

Understanding anxiety

fact sheet

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Everyone gets anxious from time to time - it's a normal response to situations like sitting an exam, starting a new job, or performing under pressure. This kind of anxiety is just a normal part of life. But for some people, the feelings of anxiety can be a lot more extreme and become what's known as an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders are common. One in four young New Zealanders will experience some kind of anxiety disorder by the time they are 24 years old.

How can I tell the difference?

Normal, healthy anxiety is usually in response to an event in your life. It usually lasts a few hours or a few days at most, and it doesn't affect your health or other parts of your life. In fact a bit of stress or anxiety can be a good thing, because it helps us perform at our best!

Too much anxiety, however, can be totally overwhelming.

Anxiety disorder is different because the feelings:

- Are quite intense
- Last for weeks, months or more
- Negatively affect your thoughts, behaviour, and general health
- Leave you feeling distressed and not enjoying life.

It can impact on other areas of your life - like how you're doing at school or work, or your relationships with friends and family.

People with anxiety disorders often become worried or upset about their problem. This may lead to them becoming depressed as well.

Symptoms of anxiety disorder

Behaviours

Avoid socialising or going out

Finding ways to reduce anxiety (e.g having someone with you all the time)

Avoiding eye contact with others

Using alcohol or drugs to calm down

Thoughts

'I'm going crazy'

'I won't have anything interesting to say'

'I can't control my worry'

'I have a serious illness that the doctors can't detect'

'What if germs get on my hands and I get sick?'

Feelings

Confused, anxious, tense all the time, constantly nervous, panicky, terrified, on edge

Physical

Blushing, trembling, heart racing numbness, tingling, nausea, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, dizziness

Types of anxiety disorders

There are a number of anxiety disorders, but the most common are:

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder** - where the person feels anxious on most days over a long period of time - six months or more.
- **Phobia** - when a person feels very fearful about a particular object or situation. Examples are fear of attending social events, driving over bridges, or travelling on planes.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** - people with OCD have ongoing intrusive thoughts and fears which cause anxiety (obsessions). These obsessions lead to the person carrying out behaviours or rituals (compulsions). An example is a fear of germs which leads to constant washing of hands and clothes.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** - this can occur any time from one month after a person has experienced a traumatic event, such as an assault, or serious accident. The symptoms can include difficulty in relaxing, bad dreams or flashbacks of the incident, and the avoidance of anything related to the event.
- **Panic Disorder** - a person with panic disorder has panic attacks, which are intense feelings of anxiety and the kind of physical symptoms you would have if in great danger. During a panic attack, you can feel like you've lost control of your body and emotions. You may feel sick, dizzy and short of breath. Panic attacks can be managed and beaten, with help.

What can I do about my anxiety?

The good news is, anxiety disorders can be managed and overcome. It's important to recognize anxiety problems and treat them as soon as possible. This can avoid a lifetime of battling with anxiety and maybe depression. Most people need to seek professional help - either from a GP, or a counsellor or psychologist. Some forms of "talking therapy", such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), are very effective for some people. For most people, talking therapy is the first choice in treating anxiety disorders, because it helps people change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations. This can also prevent further problems. It can also be helpful to learn some relaxation techniques.

To find out more:

If you want to chat about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can;

Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626.

Email The Lowdown team in the Chat section of www.thelowdown.co.nz. You can also ask them to give you a call back if you want to talk on the phone.

Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757