

Anxiety disorders

This factsheet gives information on different types of anxiety disorders, how they are diagnosed, and the causes and possible treatments. It explains what treatment the NHS should offer you if you are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. It could also help you if you're a carer, friend or relative of someone with an anxiety disorder.



KEY POINTS

- Anxiety disorders can make you feel worried, panicked and fearful.
- Anxiety can cause physical symptoms such as a fast heartbeat, shaking and sweating.
- There are different types of anxiety disorders.
- What treatment is best for you may depend on your symptoms and how severe they are.

This factsheet covers:

1. [What are anxiety disorders?](#)
2. [What are the different types of anxiety disorders and how are they diagnosed?](#)
3. [What causes anxiety disorders?](#)
4. [How are anxiety disorders treated?](#)
5. [What treatment should I be offered?](#)
6. [What if I am not happy with my treatment?](#)
7. [What risks and complications can anxiety disorders cause?](#)
8. [Information for carers, friends and relatives](#)

1. What are anxiety disorders?

We all experience feelings of anxiety, worry and fear from time to time. These are normal responses to certain situations. For example, you might be worried about an upcoming interview for a job, or that you are able to pay a bill on time. If you are in a difficult or dangerous situation, these feelings can help us be aware of the risks and what we should do.

If you have an anxiety disorder, these feelings are more noticeable and difficult to live with. They can make you feel as though things are worse than they might actually be. This can lead to you worrying all or most of the time and can affect your day to day life.

Symptoms of anxiety include:

- Feelings of dread, panic or 'impending doom'
- Feeling on edge and being alert to what is going on around you
- Difficulties sleeping
- Difficulties concentrating
- Wanting to escape from the situation you are in

You might also experience physical symptoms, which can include:

- Sweating
- Heavy and fast breathing
- Hot flushes or blushing
- Dry mouth
- Shaking
- Fast heartbeat
- Dizziness and fainting
- Stomach aches and sickness

Ali's story

Both getting to sleep and getting up in the morning is difficult for me. I have a constant sense of dread that is tough to ignore. My mind never switches off. It's exhausting.

Things like going to work or even doing the weekly shop became so tricky that I decided to speak to my GP. I'm now waiting for talking therapy.

2. What are the different types of anxiety disorder and how are they diagnosed?

There are different types of anxiety disorders. The following sections go into more detail for each condition:

- [Agoraphobia](#)
- [Body dysmorphic disorder \(BDD\)](#)
- [Generalised anxiety disorder \(GAD\)](#)
- [Hair pulling \(Trichotillomania\)](#)
- [Obsessive compulsive disorder \(OCD\)](#)
- [Panic disorder \(panic attacks\)](#)
- [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)
- [Selective mutism](#)
- [Skin picking](#)
- [Social anxiety disorder](#)
- [Toilet related anxiety](#)

Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is an anxiety disorder where you have an intense fear of certain situations, including:

- Leaving your home
- Being in public spaces
- Using public transport
- Being in crowded spaces

You might find that these situations make you feel very distressed, panicked and anxious. You may avoid some situations altogether. This can affect your day-to-day life.

Agoraphobia can make it difficult to make an appointment with your GP to talk about your symptoms. You might not feel able to leave your house or go to the GP surgery. You can always ask for a telephone appointment if you are worried you have symptoms of agoraphobia. A GP will make a diagnosis by asking you questions about your symptoms. You may need to see a specialist doctor called a psychiatrist for further assessment to get a formal diagnosis.¹

[Top](#)

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)

If you have body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), you will worry a lot about how you look or a particular part of your body. Although other people may not really notice or see it the same way, it will make you feel very distressed. For example, you may think you have an odd body shape compared to other people or that a scar makes you look unattractive. BDD is not the same as being vain or self-obsessed.

BDD can make you do things that take up a lot of time, like:

- Stare at your face or body in the mirror
- Compare your features with other people's
- Cover or conceal yourself excessively with makeup
- Consider plastic surgery when you do not need it

BDD can lead to depression. Some people with BDD have suicidal thoughts or feelings.

If you think you have BDD, you should speak to your GP. If they feel you have BDD and this is causing you problems with everyday life, then they should discuss treatment options with you. The GP could arrange for a mental health worker who is experienced in BDD to see you.²

[Top](#)

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

If you have generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), you can feel worried all the time and this can seem out of your control. It may feel as though there is no real reason for your worry. You might feel 'on edge' and very alert to your surroundings a lot of the time.

This can affect your day to day life. For example, you might find that it affects your ability to work, travel places or even leave the house. You might also get tired easily or have trouble sleeping or concentrating. You might also experience physical symptoms, such as muscle tension, sweating, feeling sick, stomach cramps (or 'butterflies') and a fear of fainting.³

It is common to have other conditions such as depression or other anxiety disorders if you have GAD.⁴

It can be difficult to diagnose because it does not have some of the more noticeable symptoms of other anxiety disorders. Your doctor is likely to say you have GAD if you've felt anxious most days for over six months.⁵

[Top](#)

Hair pulling (Trichotillomania)

Trichotillomania is a condition where you feel the urge to pull out strands of your hair. This can be from your head (usually the top of the scalp) or from other places such as your arms, eyelashes, legs or pubic area. You will find it difficult to stop yourself carrying out this action. It is linked to obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).⁶

You might experience a build-up of tension, which you relieve by pulling out the strand of hair. You might not even be aware that you're doing it.

It can be difficult to stop, which can lead to hair loss. This in turn can make you feel guilty, embarrassed and affect how you feel about yourself. Your GP may look at the following to diagnose your condition:

- You repeatedly pull your hair out, which causes noticeable hair loss.
- You feel increasing tension before you pull your hair out.
- You feel relief or pleasure when you have pulled your hair out.
- There is no underlying medical condition causing you to pull your hair out, such as a skin condition.
- Pulling your hair out causes you distress or affects your everyday life, such as your relationships or your work.⁷

[Top](#)

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

An obsession is an unwelcome thought or image that repeatedly enters your mind and is largely out of your control. These can be difficult to ignore. You may not want these thoughts and they can be disturbing, which can make you feel distressed and anxious.

Compulsions are things you think about or do repeatedly to relieve the anxiety from your obsessive thoughts.

You might believe that you or someone close to you might come to harm if you do not do these things. You may realise that your thinking and behaviour is not logical but still find it very difficult to stop.

There are different types of OCD, which include:

- Contamination
- Checking
- Intrusive thoughts
- Hoarding

When you first see a healthcare professional like a GP about your symptoms, he or she will ask you about them. This helps them to find out if you have OCD, how severe your symptoms are and what treatment will be best for you.⁸

[Top](#)

Panic disorder (panic attacks)

A panic attack makes you feel anxious and frightened. It happens suddenly and feels intense. You also have physical symptoms. These can vary but can include shortness of breath, feeling sick, sweating, trembling and feeling like you have a fast heartbeat. You may feel so anxious that you think you might be dying or having a heart attack.⁹

For some people, certain situations cause panic attacks. For example, if someone has a fear of small spaces and has to board a plane, they may have a panic attack then.

Panic disorder is where you have regular panic attacks and there is no particular trigger. This can make you worry about when you might have

another attack. If this happens, you may get a diagnosis of panic disorder.¹⁰

[Top](#)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

You can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) if you experience a traumatic or frightening event. It can develop a short time after the event, or sometimes months or years later. Types of situations that can cause PTSD include:

- Being a victim of serious violent crime
- Witnessing a violent attack on someone else
- Witnessing a death
- Being involved in military combat
- Situations working for the emergency services
- Surviving a severe accident, such as a road traffic accident
- Being held hostage
- Experiencing natural disasters, such as an earthquake

PTSD causes feelings of intense fear, helplessness and horror. You can have panic attacks, nightmares and flashbacks (seeing images or visions of the past event in your mind).

To get a diagnosis of PTSD, you will usually have to show symptoms for more than a month. You may feel less able to socialise, work or carry out everyday activities.¹¹

[Top](#)

Selective mutism

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder that stops children being able to speak in social situations. It can also cause problems later on when they become an adult. A doctor may refer a child to a speech therapist for support.

If you still have problems or symptoms as an adult, you should try and make an appointment with your GP. An advocacy service could help. You can find out more about advocacy in section 6 of this factsheet.

You can find more information on selective mutism on the NHS Choices page here:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/selective-mutism/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

[Top](#)

Skin-picking

Skin-picking is a condition where you will repetitively pick at your skin. This can cause damage to your skin, including bleeding, bruising and sometimes permanent marks. You will usually pick the skin on your face, but might also pick other areas of the body. You will find it difficult to stop yourself doing it.

It seems that skin-picking can relieve tension and stress. However, often the relief is short-lived, and you will feel the urge to continue picking. You may not be aware that you are doing it. It is linked to obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) as it shares similar symptoms.¹²

Because skin-picking leaves visible marks, you might go to lengths to hide these using makeup or clothing.

Your GP may arrange for you to see a specialist mental health doctor like a psychiatrist for diagnosis.¹³

[Top](#)

Social anxiety disorder

Social anxiety disorder (sometimes known as social phobia), means you will have an intense fear or dread of social or performance situations.

Some common situations where you may experience anxiety are:

- Speaking in public or in groups
- Meeting new people or strangers
- Dating
- Eating or drinking in public

You will be worried that you will do something or act in a way that is embarrassing or humiliating.

You might feel very aware of the physical signs of your anxiety. This can include sweating, a fast heartbeat, a shaky voice and blushing. You may worry that others will notice this or judge you. As a result you might find that you try to avoid such situations completely. You might realise that your fears are excessive, but will find it difficult to control them.

Your GP will ask you questions about your symptoms, and might ask you to fill out a questionnaire. This will help them find out what how anxious you feel in social situations.¹⁴

If you feel that it would be difficult to visit your GP, you can ask for a telephone appointment.

[Top](#)

Toilet-related anxiety

This is a fear of using toilets in either your own home, someone else's home or in public spaces. This can lead to difficulty and embarrassment when needing to use the toilet.

You may fear that other people can hear you using the toilet, worry about the cleanliness of the toilet, or worry about being able to use the toilet at all.

Anxiety UK runs a special project on toilet-related anxiety. You can find their contact details at the end of this factsheet.

[Top](#)

3. What causes anxiety disorders?

We do not fully understand what causes anxiety disorders.

Difficult past events can trigger some anxiety disorders (for example, being bullied at school, or seeing a traumatic event). Brain chemicals and your environment can also cause anxiety.¹⁵

[Top](#)

4. How are anxiety disorders treated?

What treatment is best for you will depend on your particular symptoms or anxiety disorder diagnosis.

This should be based on what you, your doctor or your healthcare team agree to in advance.

Common treatments for anxiety disorders include:

Psychological treatments/ talking therapies

Different types of 'talking therapies' are often effective at treating anxiety disorders. This is where you talk through your problems with a trained professional (usually a therapist or a counsellor). There are many different types of talking therapies. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is recommended for many anxiety disorders.

You can ask your GP to put you in touch with a local talking therapy service, or in some areas you may be able to contact them yourself. If you are getting help from your local mental health team, you could ask your care coordinator or psychiatrist about talking therapies.

You can access CBT through your computer or online if you find it difficult to leave the house or talk to others.

Medication

Your doctor may offer you medication to help with your symptoms.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are a type of antidepressant used to treat different anxiety disorders including generalised anxiety disorders (GAD), panic disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

Benzodiazepines can relieve the symptoms of anxiety. Doctors will only prescribe benzodiazepines if your anxiety is extreme or if you are in crisis. This is because they are addictive and you can build a tolerance to them (meaning they can lose their effect the longer you take them).

Beta-blockers can also help with anxiety. They are particularly useful if you experience physical signs of anxiety. They can help to lower a fast heartbeat, shakiness or facial flushing/ blushing.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies are treatments that are not part of mainstream medical care. Some people find them useful for helping with symptoms of anxiety. They can include things like mindfulness, yoga and hypnotherapy.

You can find more information on these treatments in the following factsheets:

- Talking Therapies
- Antidepressants
- Benzodiazepines
- Complementary Therapies

These are available to download for free from www.rethink.org/factsheets or by contacting us directly on 0300 5000 927.

[Top](#)

5. What treatment should I be offered?

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) produces guidance for the NHS on how to treat certain conditions. The guidance looks at medication and talking therapies. There is guidance for treating a number of anxiety disorders including:

- Anxiety (which includes generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) and panic disorder)
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

You can download these for free from the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) or contact NICE publications on 0845 003 7783 for hard copies. NICE has written copies of these guidelines specifically for patients and carers.

[Top](#)

6. What if I am not happy with my treatment?

If you ever feel unhappy with how your treatment or care is being handled, or feel that the relationship between yourself and a professional is not working well, you could call the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) at your NHS trust. They can try to resolve any problems or questions you have. You can find your local PALS' details at [http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-\(PALS\)/LocationSearch/363](http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-(PALS)/LocationSearch/363) or our Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service could search for you.

You might find a general/community advocate helpful if you are unhappy with your treatment. Advocacy can help you understand the mental health system and enable you to be fully involved in decisions about your care. An advocate is someone independent from mental health services who can help to make your voice heard when you are trying to resolve problems. They may be able to help with writing letters for you or attending appointments or meetings. You can find more information about advocacy in our '**Advocacy**' factsheet.

There may be a local advocacy service in your area which you can contact for support. You can search online for a local service or our Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service could search for you.

If you are not happy with your treatment, you can refer to the NICE guidance to see if you are being offered the recommended treatments. You can find all of their guidelines at www.nice.org.

You can find out more about getting a second opinion, having a choice in your medication or making a complaint at www.rethink.org.

It might also help to contact one of our specialist advisers to discuss problems you are having with your care and treatment. You can call us on 0300 5000 927 between 10 and 2pm Monday to Friday or email advice@rethink.org.

[Top](#)

7. What risks and complications can anxiety disorders cause?

Having an anxiety disorder can cause longer-term problems such:

- Difficulties sleeping
- Problems with having sex
- Headaches
- Feeling less able to work
- Drinking or taking drugs to help with the feelings of anxiety

If you are worried about your anxiety and are not getting any help at the moment, then it is best to speak to your GP. You can find more information on visiting your GP in our **‘What to expect from your GP’** factsheet, which you can download for free from www.rethink.org or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

You may also find it helpful to speak to one of the organisations listed in our useful contacts section.

[Top](#)

8. Information for carers, friends and relatives

As a carer, friend or family member of someone living with anxiety disorders, you might find that you also need support. Our **‘Supporting someone with a mental illness’** factsheet may be useful.

It is important to seek emotional support for yourself if you are struggling to cope. You could check whether there are any local support groups for carers, friends and relatives in your area.

If you feel you need additional support to care for your loved one you could ask for a carer’s assessment. You can find more information in our **‘Carers Assessments’** factsheet.

If your loved one is supported by a mental health team and you are their carer, you should be involved with decisions about care planning. There are particular rules regarding confidentiality and carers. Unless the person you care for consents, confidential information about them cannot be passed on to you or other family, friends and carers. The team should seek permission from them and ask what they are happy for others to know. This would also include any care plans that are drawn up. You can find more information in our **‘Confidentiality and Information Sharing – For Carers, Friends and Relatives’** factsheet.

You can download our factsheets for free from www.rethink.org/factsheets or call 0300 5000 927 and ask for a copy to be sent to you.

[Top](#)



Anxiety UK is a user led organisation that supports anyone with anxiety, phobias, panic attacks or other anxiety related disorders. They can be contacted at:

Tel: 08444 775 774 or 0161 227 9898 (Monday to Friday 9.30am–5.30pm)
Address: Anxiety UK, Zion Community Resource Centre, 339 Stretford Road, Hulme, Manchester. M15 4ZY
Email: info@anxietyuk.org.uk
Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Anxiety Alliance is a charity dedicated to helping those suffering from anxiety.

Tel: 0845 2967877 (open 10am-10pm daily)

Address: 26 Tannery Court, Bertie Road, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 1QY

Email: harris835@btinternet.com

Website: www.anxietyalliance.org.uk

SASH (London Social Anxiety Self-Help Groups) run different groups in the London area.

Email: info@sashgroup.org

Website: www.sashgroup.org

Social Anxiety UK offers support with social anxiety disorder. They are a web-based organisation and offer forums, a chatroom and information on the condition.

Email: contact@social-anxiety.org.uk

Website: www.social-anxiety.org.uk

OCD-UK gives information, advice and support on obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and related disorders such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), skin-picking and hair pulling.

Tel: 0845 120 3778

Address: OCD-UK, PO Box 8955, Nottingham. NG10 9AU

Email: support@ocduk.org

Website: www.ocduk.org

Combat Stress offers support for veterans who have been involved in military combat and have symptoms of PTSD.

Tel: 0800 138 1619

Address: Combat Stress, Tyrwhitt House, Oaklawn Road, Leatherhead, Surrey. KT22 0BX

Email: contactus@combatstress.org.uk

Website: www.combatstress.org.uk

No Panic offers emotional support and information on anxiety disorders and medication including tranquilizers.

Tel: 0800 138 8889 (open 10am-10pm daily)

Email: ceo@nopanic.org.uk

Web: www.nopanic.org.uk



- ¹ NHS Choices. *Agoraphobia diagnosis*
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Agoraphobia/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx>
(Accessed Oct 2013)
- ² National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2005) Core interventions in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder and body dysmorphic disorder. CG31. London
- ³ NHS Choices. *Anxiety symptoms*
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- ⁴ National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2007) Generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder (with or without agoraphobia) in adults: Management in primary, secondary and community care. CG113. London
- ⁵ NHS Choices. *Anxiety diagnosis*
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx> (Accessed Oct 2013)
- ⁶ OCD-UK. *Trichotillomania* <http://www.ocduk.org/trichotillomania>
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- ⁷ NHS Choices. *Trichotillomania diagnosis*
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/trichotillomania/Pages/diagnosis.aspx>
(Accessed Oct 2013)
- ⁸ See reference 2
- ⁹ NHS Choices. *Panic disorder* <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Panic-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx> (Accessed Oct 2013)
- ¹⁰ See reference 9
- ¹¹ National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2005) The management of PTSD in adults and children in primary and secondary care. CG26. London.
- ¹² OCD-UK *Compulsive skin-picking* <http://www.ocduk.org/compulsive-skin-picking> (Accessed Oct 2013)
- ¹³ See reference 12
- ¹⁴ NHS Choices. *Social anxiety disorder*
<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-anxiety/Pages/Social-anxiety.aspx>
(Accessed Oct 2013)
- ¹⁵ NHS Choices. *Anxiety causes*
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Causes.aspx> (Accessed Oct 2013)

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This factsheet is available
in large print.



Rethink Mental Illness

Phone 0300 5000 927
Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback
PO Box 68795
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday.



Leading the way to a better
quality of life for everyone
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information
on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0300 5000 927
Email info@rethink.org

www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights. Or talk to others about your problem at www.rethink.org/talk.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0300 5000 927. We are open 9am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us between 10am and 2pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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