What Is Anxiety?

An anxiety disorder is a type of mental health condition. If you have an anxiety disorder, you may respond to certain things and situations with fear and dread. You may also experience physical signs of anxiety, such as a pounding heart and sweating.

It's normal to have some anxiety. You may feel anxious or nervous if you have to tackle a problem at work, go to an interview, take a test or make an important decision. Some anxiety can even be beneficial — it helps us notice dangerous situations and focuses our attention, so we stay safe.

But anxiety disorder goes beyond the regular nervousness and slight fear you may feel from time to time. Anxiety disorder happens when:

Anxiety interferes with your ability to function. Your reactions are often out of proportion to situations (overreactions). You can't control your responses to situations. Children, adolescents and adults can experience anxiety disorders. Women are about twice as likely as men to have one.

Anxiety disorders can make it difficult to get through the day. Fortunately, there are several effective treatments for these conditions.

Types of anxiety disorders

There are several types of anxiety disorders according to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). This is the standard reference manual for diagnosing mental health conditions.

Types of anxiety disorders include:

- Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD): This condition causes fear, worry and a constant feeling of being overwhelmed. It's characterized by excessive, frequent and unrealistic worry about everyday things, such as job responsibilities, health or chores.

- Agoraphobia: This condition causes an intense fear of becoming overwhelmed or unable to escape or get help. People with agoraphobia often avoid new places and unfamiliar situations, like large, open areas or enclosed spaces, crowds and places outside of their homes.

- Panic disorder: This condition involves multiple unexpected panic attacks. A main feature of the condition is that the attacks usually happen without warning and aren't due to another mental health or physical condition. Some people with panic disorders also have agoraphobia.

- Specific phobias: A phobia is when something causes you to feel fear or anxiety that's so severe it consistently and overwhelmingly disrupts your life. There are hundreds of different types of phobias, and there's one diagnosis for almost all of them: specific phobia. Only one phobia, agoraphobia, is a distinct diagnosis.

- Social anxiety disorder: This condition (formerly known as social phobia) happens when you experience intense and ongoing fear of being judged negatively and/or watched by others.
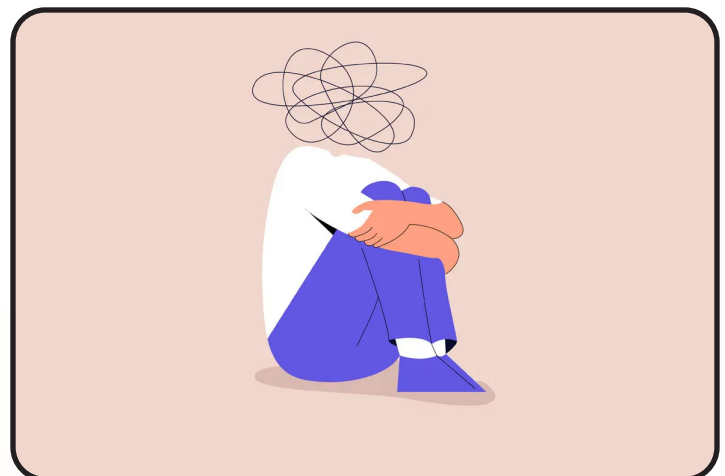
- Separation anxiety disorder: This condition happens when you feel excessive anxiety when you're separated from a loved one, like a primary caregiver. While separation anxiety in babies and toddlers is a normal stage of development, separation anxiety disorder can affect children and adults.