

# Anxiety-Related Disorders

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## WHAT'S COVERED

Anxiety disorders are some of the most common mental disorders encountered alongside depression, mood disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and learning disorders. This tutorial will specifically discuss:

## 1. Overview of Anxiety Disorders

**Anxiety disorders** appear in almost 20% of adults. When anxiety is discussed, it is referring to any feelings of nervousness, or worry, or unease within a person.

Anxiety isn't necessarily all bad. In fact, anxiety can be helpful for people to identify things that are particularly important or dangerous. It's almost sort of a mental indicator or clue to the person that they need to pay particular attention to something.

However, an anxiety disorder is a type of disorder where a person feels anxiety, worry, or unease in a pervasive or particularly strong or unnecessary kind of way. In addition, the disorder impairs their life in some form.

Often, people with an anxiety disorder can develop feelings of defensiveness and inferiority, as well as an insecurity towards other people. Many times, they might feel threatened, and they can't necessarily do anything about it. So, you can see how that could impair a person's life in certain ways.

Remember, when we talk about mental disorders, we're referring to extremes of mental functions or behaviors. Therefore, when we discuss anxiety disorders, we don't mean anxiety in its normal form.

➞ **EXAMPLE** For example, when we say somebody is anxious when they're taking a test, that's normal behavior. It is normal to feel worried when something is particularly important to you.

When a person has a panic attack, though, it's not just that normal feeling of anxiety, but rather it feels as though their life is in physical danger. For example, they may start choking, or it becomes hard for them to breathe. They might have chest pains, feel nauseous, or even lose control of their body and literally drop to the ground.

All of those feelings can last for a period of minutes to hours. You can see how this could be detrimental to a person to an extreme degree.



## TERM TO KNOW

## Anxiety Disorder

A disorder in which people feel worry or unease in a pervasive or particularly strong or unnecessary way, which impairs their life in some way.

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## 2. Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Anxiety disorders can take a lot of different forms. **Generalized anxiety disorder** is a feeling of being anxious or tense without any specific cause. This feeling of anxiety occurs in a person for at least six months in length. Often, though, it can happen for longer periods of time. A person may feel especially jittery or constantly on edge, with accompanying physical symptoms like sweating or rapid heart rate, an upset stomach, dizziness, and trouble concentrating.

Note that generalized anxiety disorders don't involve short, quick periods of increased anxiety; this would be something like a panic disorder, which we will discuss in the next section. Rather, it's characterized by long periods of time where a person has a constant, pervasive feeling of anxiety, and it can vary in its intensity. It can be very intense, or it can be general and sort of in the background with the person for the majority of the time. Even so, you can see how having these feelings could make a person feel very distraught or stressed out as a result.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Generalized Anxiety Disorder

An anxiety disorder where a person has a feeling of being anxious or tense without any specific cause for at least 6 months.

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## 3. Panic Disorder

A **panic disorder**, on the other hand, is when a person has a constant feeling of anxiety, as mentioned before, with frequent periods of especially intense and often unexpected panic or anxiety occurring. This is what we call a panic attack—that short period of time where a person suddenly feels incredibly worried or nervous, almost without any physical control over it, often for no apparent reason.

However, a panic attack can also be because of specific causes, though the intensity is disproportional for those causes.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If someone becomes especially stressed out by something at work, they might have a panic attack. This, in turn, increases that feeling of anxiety to a degree that is unbalanced. The reaction does not match the situation.

A person having a panic attack can feel like they're having a heart attack, or they might feel like they're actually going to die. This is a very stressful thing for a person to experience. In addition, panic disorder can occur either with or without agoraphobia, which will be discussed in the next section.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Panic Disorder

An anxiety disorder when a person has a constant feeling of anxiety with frequent periods of intense, unexpected panic; can occur with or without agoraphobia.

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## 4. Agoraphobia

**Agoraphobia** is anxiety or fear of being in an open space or an unfamiliar space where escape is especially difficult. Now, this is different from what we would call social anxiety disorder, which is a fear of being in social situations and interacting with others, although an agoraphobic person would feel anxious in a crowded public place just like a person with social anxiety disorder.

However, an agoraphobic person would also feel very anxious or afraid if they're out in the middle of the woods with no people present. This happens because they're in a situation where they feel exposed, and they aren't sure where they can escape or run to for safety.

Someone who has a panic disorder with agoraphobia may have a panic attack as a result of being out in public, as a result of their agoraphobia. Or, they might be so worried in anticipation of having a panic attack that they stay at home. In other words, their agoraphobia might affect or be affected by their panic disorder. In reality, these two can feed on each other.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Agoraphobia**

Anxiety or fear of being in open spaces or unfamiliar ones where escape is difficult.

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## 5. Treatment and Coping

Panic attacks, panic disorders, and generalized anxiety disorders can be treated with medication like antidepressants. Anxiolytics are drugs that are specifically designed to decrease anxiety and feelings of fear.

Treatment can also include teaching strategies to reduce or cope with the anxiety, which can help people with anxiety disorders to better mentally deal with their general or specific anxieties.

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## 6. Phobias

**Phobias** are a type of anxiety disorder. The word phobia comes from the Greek word *phobos*, which means fear. It is also the name of the Greek god of fear. A phobia is any strong, irrational fear of specific things or situations.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Hematophobia is a fear of blood, and coulrophobia is a fear of clowns.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Phobia**

A strong, irrational fear of specific things or situations.

### 6a. Types

Specific phobias can also refer to a condition where a person has a fear that is rational, but is stronger than it really should be.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Arachnophobia is a fear of spiders. Spiders *can* hurt you; however, a person that has arachnophobia can have a serious or debilitating reaction to them. If this person sees a spider, they might run screaming and not be able to control themselves until they get away from the spider.

One common type of phobia is **social phobia**, which is a fear of being in social situations and interacting with others in a public place—a phobia that can have adverse consequences for a person.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If a person has a social phobia, they might decide to stay at home all the time, and may not be building personal relationships.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Social Phobia

Fear of being in social situations and interacting with others.

### 6b. Treatments

There are different kinds of treatments for phobias. Desensitization is a behavioral treatment where a person is gradually and increasingly exposed to the thing that they're afraid of. This gradual exposure helps to teach them that it's not something to necessarily be afraid of.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If a person has arachnophobia, they might first be shown a picture of a spider. The next step may be being placed in a room with a spider on the other side of it. Gradually, the person might move closer, and may actually end up holding the spider.

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## 7. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Another type of anxiety disorder is **obsessive-compulsive disorder**, or **OCD**. This is a disorder where a person becomes especially preoccupied with certain thoughts or feelings, and has a strong motivation to perform certain actions—a result of the preoccupying thoughts and feelings.

These thoughts and feelings are called **obsessions**, and they are often unwanted and intrusive. Usually, these thoughts are negative, and they can create intense feelings of anxiety or worry in a person.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A person might constantly have a concern or fear of being hurt by something, or they might constantly feel unclean and have a compulsion to get clean in some way.

**Compulsions** are actions that a person performs repeatedly, to reduce the feelings of anxiety they have. Usually, these compulsions are irrational. The actions don't actually prevent the person from experiencing their fear, but they do help to distract the person or push those thoughts out of their mind in some way. Sometimes the compulsion must be enacted in a certain way or in a certain number.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A person might have a sudden fear of being hurt that goes away when they count certain things like heart beats or footsteps.

Another form of obsessive-compulsive disorder is hoarding. A person may feel the need to keep everything or certain types of things.

➞ **EXAMPLE** For instance, a person might feel like they need to keep every old note or receipt in order to keep their anxious thoughts at bay.

OCD is often treated with cognitive behavioral therapy. The person learns to refrain from certain kinds of compulsive behavior and to recognize these irrational thought processes. Gradually, a person will learn to reduce their stress and anxiety, and to realize that the compulsions don't necessarily help with their

obsessions.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

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

A disorder in which a person becomes preoccupied with certain thoughts or feels a strong motivation or requirement to perform certain actions.

##### **Obsessions**

Thoughts or feelings that are unwanted and intrusive and create intense anxiety or worry in the person.

##### **Compulsions**

Actions that person feels compelled to perform repeatedly to reduce feelings of anxiety from obsessions.

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## 8. Stress Disorders

Stress disorders are a type of anxiety disorder caused by something specific within a person's environment. Other anxiety disorders have no real apparent cause or are caused by something that isn't rational.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A generalized anxiety disorder is a general feeling of anxiety that a person has with no actual cause within the environment, and a phobia is an irrational fear of something that isn't a problem or a real danger.

### 8a. Stressors

Stress disorders have a recognizable stressor, either an event or object within the environment, that threatens a person and causes some degree of stress or anxiety to them. Often, these stressors can be significant events and major changes within a person's life; stressors can even be other people in a person's life.

The following are two types of stress:

- **Traumatic stress:** Refers to major events that cause a person psychological or emotional harm or damage. Events like natural disasters, or being raped or tortured can cause huge amounts of stress or anxiety.
- **Acculturative stress:** Caused by moving to a foreign country and the requirements needed to adapt to a new and strange place. This is especially common for immigrants coming over to the United States.

Stressors such as these can lead to stress disorders. Symptoms that can disrupt a person's life may include insomnia or nightmares, jumpiness and irritability, and poor concentration. A person might have a short temper, they may practice avoidance or they may emotionally withdraw from others. A person who has experienced traumatic stress may have flashbacks in which they relive the traumatic events, like it is happening to them in real time.

➞ **EXAMPLE** To a child, a school bully might be an undue stressor in their life.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Traumatic Stress**

Major events that cause a person psychological or emotional harm.

### Acculturative Stress

Stress caused by moving to a foreign culture and all the requirements to adapt to a new and strange place.

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## 9. Types of Stress Disorders

There are two different types of stress disorders. The only difference between these two is the amount of time that the person displays the symptoms.

- **Acute stress disorder** is characterized by symptoms lasting for less than a month.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** is characterized by symptoms lasting for a month or longer; this is also known as PTSD.

PTSD is very common for soldiers that are returning from the military duty, and the majority of PTSD cases come from this source. The terrible sights and sounds of war, as well as the constant stress of being in danger or of being attacked can lead to stress disorders. In addition, stress disorders can lead to the development of unhealthy coping strategies.

➔ **EXAMPLE** People that have acute stress disorder or PTSD might develop problems with drugs or alcohol, or resort to self harm as a way coping with the stress and anxiety.

Therapies like psychodynamic therapy treat stress disorders and can help a person to recognize unhealthy coping strategies and develop alternative healthy ones.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Acute Stress Disorder

A stress disorder where symptoms (like trouble sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, avoidance and emotional withdrawal) last for less than a month.

#### Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

A stress disorder where symptoms (like trouble sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, avoidance and emotional withdrawal) last for more than a month.



### SUMMARY

In this **overview of anxiety disorders** you learned that anxiety disorder refers to any disorder where a person feels anxiety, worry, or unease, in a pervasive or particularly strong or unnecessary kind of way. **Generalized anxiety** occurs in a person for at least six months in length, while **panic attacks** are short bursts during which the individual may feel as though they are having a heart attack. Panic disorders can occur with or without **agoraphobia**, which is a fear of being in open or unfamiliar spaces where escape is difficult. **Treatment** for anxiety disorders include medication like antidepressants or anxiolytics, or teaching **coping strategies** to manage anxiety.

**Phobias** are a type of anxiety disorder in which a person has a strong irrational fear of specific things or situations. This is often treated through desensitization. **Obsessive-compulsive disorder**, or **OCD**, is

another type of anxiety disorder in which a person has an obsession which leads to compulsive behavior in an attempt to reduce the anxiety caused by the obsession. This is often treated with cognitive behavioral therapy.

**Stress disorders** are a type of anxiety disorder caused by a recognizable stressor. This stressor can be an event or something in an environment which threatens a person; it can even be another person or people. Traumatic stress refers to major events that cause a person psychological or emotional harm, whereas acculturative stress is caused by moving to a foreign country. Symptoms of a stress disorder can negatively impact a person's life. There are two **types of stress disorders**. The symptoms of acute stress disorder last less than a month, while the symptoms of **post-traumatic stress disorder**, or **PTSD**, last longer than a month.

Good luck!

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Acculturative Stress**

Stress caused by moving to a foreign culture and all the requirements to adapt to a new and strange place.

### **Acute Stress Disorder**

A stress disorder where symptoms (like trouble sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, avoidance and emotional withdrawal) last for less than a month.

### **Agoraphobia**

Anxiety or fear of being in open spaces or unfamiliar ones where escape is difficult.

### **Anxiety Disorder**

A disorder in which people feel worry or unease in a pervasive or particularly strong or unnecessary way, which impairs their life in some way.

### **Compulsions**

Actions that a person feels compelled to perform repeatedly to reduce feelings of anxiety from obsessions.

### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder**

An anxiety disorder where a person has a feeling of being anxious or tense without any specific cause for at least 6 months.

### **Obsessions**

Thoughts or feelings that are unwanted and intrusive and create intense anxiety or worry in the person.

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

A disorder in which a person becomes preoccupied with certain thoughts or feels a strong motivation or requirement to perform certain actions.

### **Panic Disorder**

An anxiety disorder when a person has a constant feeling of anxiety with frequent periods of intense, unexpected panic; can occur with or without agoraphobia.

**Phobia**

A strong, irrational fear of specific things or situations.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

A stress disorder where symptoms (like trouble sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, avoidance and emotional withdrawal) last for more than a month.

**Social Phobia**

Fear of being in social situations and interacting with others.

**Traumatic Stress**

Major events that cause a person psychological or emotional harm.