



# Anxiety

*Anxiety is more than feeling stressed or worried. It can be tough to cope, but with the right help and support you can learn ways to manage and reduce your anxiety.*

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal healthy response to stress, fear or danger. It focuses the mind and body on getting ready to deal with a threat. When there's a threat, our body responds by going through physical changes such as our heart beating faster, our breathing becoming faster, we might start sweating, and feel very tense. This response is known as the 'fight or flight' response and it prepares us to be able to react quickly when faced with a fearful situation.

Anxiety can help us perform better by helping us feel alert and motivated like when we are sitting an exam or playing sport. However, sometimes we experience anxiety when there is no direct danger. This is when anxiety can be unhelpful, and when it reaches a level that disrupts our everyday lives – like stopping us from socialising, going to school or work, or interfering with our relationships with friends or whānau.

Feeling tense or nervous at times when dealing with stressful situations is a normal experience. If your anxiety is persisting to the point of affecting your daily life and causing you distress, then it is a good idea to get some help and support. It is okay to ask for help. Most people can experience significant improvement in their anxiety through seeking support or professional help.



## What are the signs and symptoms?

1 in 4 New Zealanders will experience anxiety<sup>1</sup>. Everyone experiences anxiety differently, but there are some common signs and symptoms of anxiety that may include:

### Physical changes:

- ✘ a racing heart
- ✘ faster breathing
- ✘ feeling tense or having aches (especially neck, shoulders and back)
- ✘ sweating or feeling dizzy
- ✘ shaking
- ✘ 'butterflies'
- ✘ feeling sick in the stomach/ tummy aches

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<sup>1</sup> \* Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey. Wellington: Ministry of Health. 2006

- ✘ migraines/ headaches
- ✘ vomiting.

### **Changes in thoughts:**

- ✘ worrying about things a lot of the time
- ✘ being unable to control the worries
- ✘ having trouble concentrating and paying attention
- ✘ worries that seem out of proportion to the situation
- ✘ thinking the worst will happen
- ✘ a lot of 'what if' thinking, e.g. What if I can't do this? What if I fail?

### **Other changes:**

- ✘ being unable to relax
- ✘ avoiding people or places like school, church, family events, sports or parties
- ✘ withdrawing from friends and family
- ✘ feeling annoyed, irritated or restless
- ✘ difficulty getting to sleep at night or waking up a lot during the night
- ✘ feeling tired or exhausted easily
- ✘ not feeling like eating.

## **What are the common types of anxiety disorders?**

Anxiety disorders are some of the most common mental health challenges experienced by young people. People can experience different types of anxiety disorders, but it's important to know that they can all be treated.

### **Generalised anxiety**

Some people may worry about all sorts of things a lot of the time and they may feel that their worries are out of control or that they can't stop worrying. This might include being afraid of natural disasters, worries about their health or their loved one's health, or their school performance. They might feel tense and nervous most of the time, have trouble sleeping or find it hard to concentrate.

### **Social anxiety**

Some people may experience intense anxiety in social situations because of a fear of doing something embarrassing or that people might laugh at them. This may lead a person to start avoiding situations where there are other people, like hanging out with friends or going to work, school or uni, church, social



or family events. They might also avoid social activities like going to parties, performing, or speaking in front of others.

### **Separation anxiety**

Some people experience intense fear about being away from loved ones, like parents, siblings, or their boyfriend/girlfriend, and they worry about those people being sick or hurt. They may experience worry or distress when being apart from this person, having difficulty going to school or work, and will often struggle with physical symptoms of their anxiety.

### **Agoraphobia**

Some people feel intense anxiety about being in particular environments outside the home. This can include public spaces, public transport, enclosed spaces or crowds. They fear these situations because they worry it may be difficult to escape from these places if they experience panic. They actively avoid these places, go there with a lot of distress, or will only go there with another person.

### **Post-traumatic stress disorder**

People who have experienced or seen a frightening traumatic event may experience symptoms that include having upsetting vivid memories, having nightmares, being easily startled, avoiding people or places connected to the trauma, and having difficulty concentrating or feeling emotions.

### **Obsessive-Compulsive disorder**

Some people have unwanted or intrusive thoughts that make them feel anxious, or they engage in rituals or compulsions in an attempt to reduce their anxiety. These compulsions can include excessive washing, checking, tapping or mental routines such as counting.

### **Panic disorder**

Some people have recurring panic attacks and ongoing fears they will experience another panic attack. When experiencing panic, people will often think that there is something seriously wrong with their body. These sensations are very distressing but are not harmful. As a result of this fear they will avoid certain situations, afraid that they will experience another panic attack.

### **Specific phobias**

Sometimes a person may experience an intense or extreme fear of a particular situation or object, like being in small spaces or heights. Other common phobias include a fear of dogs, injections or spiders. This fear usually leads to a person avoiding the situation or object and/or becoming extremely frightened when faced with the situation or object.

**Lots of people avoid things they're scared of. When fears and anxieties get in the way of daily life, or stop us enjoying life, then it's time to get help and support.**

## What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are sudden rushes of intense anxiety or fear together with frightening thoughts and physical feelings.

### Frightening thoughts might include:

- ✂ 'I'm going to die'.
- ✂ 'I can't breathe'.
- ✂ 'This isn't going to stop'.
- ✂ 'I'm having a heart attack'.

### Physical feelings might include:

- ✂ pounding heart
- ✂ sweating
- ✂ difficulty breathing
- ✂ shaking
- ✂ feeling dizzy
- ✂ feeling sick.

Panic attacks can feel overwhelming but are usually short (about 10 minutes). It's important to know that they do pass and don't cause lasting harm.



## What can I do to cope with anxiety?

There are plenty of ways to manage your anxiety so that it doesn't get in the way of your daily life.

### Take care of yourself

Managing anxiety starts with good self-care. Try to eat well, get enough sleep and stay active to help your overall mental health and wellbeing. Looking after your spiritual and cultural wellbeing will also support your resilience. Creating a self-care planner/diary can support you to improve your self-care.

### Talk about it

If you are experiencing anxiety that is affecting your wellbeing then it's a good idea to talk about how you're feeling – whether it's with your family, friends, a teacher, coach, church leader or Elder. Talking with others can help you understand what's going on, stick to your self-care goals and get extra help if needed.

### Notice your thinking patterns

Being aware of what thoughts are influencing your anxiety is an important step towards managing it. When people experience anxiety, they can get into unhelpful thinking patterns, which can make the anxiety



worse. Being aware of these thinking patterns can help you understand what contributes to your anxiety and what your triggers are. This can help you to handle them differently and learn new ways to cope.

The Journal website [www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) has tools that can help you work through thinking patterns.

### **Be aware of avoidance**

It's normal to want to avoid situations that make you feel anxious. It might work in the short-term, but over time it can make your anxiety feel worse.

This is because you don't get the opportunity to learn that the thing you fear may not happen or be as bad as you think. As you realise you can manage anxious situations by learning coping strategies, you'll become more confident and motivated to keep it up.

### **Try new breathing techniques**

Lots of anxiety symptoms involve a cycle of physical sensations. Working on controlling your breathing is a good way to try to interrupt that cycle. [The Mental Wealth website breathing activities](#) are a good place to start.

### **Limit your use of alcohol and other drugs**

While these things might help you to feel good in the short term, they can make you feel much worse in the longer term. Check out [The Mental Wealth website](#) for ways to limit your alcohol and other drug use.

### **Anxiety and depression**

Many young people experiencing an anxiety disorder may also experience [symptoms of depression](#). This can make things much more confusing. If you think this is happening to you, it's important to reach out for support.

## Where to get help

You GP or family doctor can help recommend an approach for you and might also suggest antidepressant medications. Psychological talking therapy may also be recommended for treating depression.

If you're at school or uni, you may also be able to access a counselling or student wellbeing service.

You can also text or freephone 1737, New Zealand's free support service with qualified and confidential counsellors. Let them know what's going on for you or the person you are concerned about, and they can support you.



## Other free helplines

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| <b>Youthline</b>    | 0800 376 633, free text 234, webchat at <a href="http://www.youthline.co.nz">www.youthline.co.nz</a> .                                     |
| <b>What's UP</b>    | 0800 942 8787 - Advice & counselling support for 5-18-year olds; 12pm to 11pm.   |
| <b>Kidsline</b>     | 0800 54 37 54 (0800 KIDSLINE) - Advice & counselling support up to 14 years; 4pm to 9pm weekdays.  |
| <b>Youth Law</b>    | 0800 884529 (0800 UTHLAW) - Free legal help for children and young people.   |
| <b>OUTLine NZ</b>   | 0800 688 5463 - Support for sexuality or gender identity issues.   |
| <b>Safe to talk</b> | text 4334 or online chat to someone <a href="http://www.safetotalk.nz">www.safetotalk.nz</a> - Confidential advice for sexual harm issues. |
| <b>Samaritans</b>   | 0800 726 666 - Counselling advice and support.   |
| <b>Healthline</b>   | 0800 611 116 - General health advice and information from a registered nurse.  |
| <b>Lifeline</b>     | 0800 543 354 or text 'Help' to 4357 - Counselling advice and support.  |

## Free online tools & info

 <p>Education &amp; support to look after your mental health, with free web-chat 24/7.</p>	 <p>For when life sux, Aunty Dee can help you solve your problems.</p>	 <p>E-therapy for young people who are feeling down, worried or stressed.</p>
 <p>Online community &amp; support for young people.</p>	 <p>Culturally based tools to support Pacific young people to unleash their full potential.</p>	 <p>Support and advice for managing online safety.</p>
 <p>For whanau and friends to understand what young people go through.</p>	 <p>Support for young people experiencing depression or anxiety.</p>	 <p>A virtual distraction &amp; self soothe kit.</p>
 <p>A step-by-step approach for working through anxiety &amp; depression.</p>	 <p>Learn mindfulness to develop better wellbeing.</p>	 <p>Info &amp; resources for queer &amp; gender diverse youth.</p>

This factsheet was put together in collaboration with Headspace Australia (National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd).

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