

#### Fact sheet

For non-clinical professionals  
who work with young people

# When anxiety is a problem

## Signs and symptoms in young people

Anxiety is more than feeling stressed or worried. Anxious and stressed feelings can be a normal response to upcoming uncertain and stressful situations such as an exam, important sports game or starting a new job. Anxiety is our body's way of responding to potential threat or pressures, and in small doses can actually help us perform better by keeping us alert and motivated. However these feelings usually pass when the stressful situation is over. Anxiety becomes a problem when the worry or fear is persistent or excessive, and gets in the way of a young person achieving their full potential in areas such as school, work and social relationships.

## Anxiety disorders in young people

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problem experienced by young people. Approximately 15% of young Australians aged 16-24 years experience an anxiety disorder each year (1). Anxiety disorders also have a younger age of onset than most other mental health problems and approximately 50% of people with an anxiety disorder experience their first symptoms by the age of 11 years (2). Anxiety disorder is a broad term that includes a number of different disorders characterised by excessive fear, worry or dread which feels uncontrollable and interferes with daily life. While the different anxiety disorders share similarities, each have unique symptoms and are associated with different underlying fears of different situations or objects. The anxiety disorders most commonly experienced by young people are:

- **Agoraphobia:** Fear of being in a place or situation where it may be difficult to escape or where help may not be available should a panic attack (see description below) occur (e.g., public transport, music concerts)
- **Generalised anxiety disorder:** Anxiety or worry about *multiple* everyday issues or events (e.g., school or work performance, being late, global warming, family's finances)
- **Panic disorder:** Repeated, sudden panic attacks accompanied by fear of having another panic attack, and significant changes to behaviour as a result (e.g., avoiding sports because it might increase heart rate)
- **Social anxiety disorder (social phobia):** Fear of social situations where there is exposure to possible scrutiny, judgment, or rejection by others (e.g., meeting new people at a party, delivering a presentation in class), and where they may act in a way that will be embarrassing or humiliating, or show anxiety symptoms (e.g, blushing, stammering)
- **Specific phobia:** Intense fear and avoidance of a specific object or situation (e.g., heights, injections) that is out of proportion to the actual threat

## Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are not uncommon and many people may experience one at some point in their lives. Having a panic attack does not mean the person has an anxiety disorder, though many people with anxiety disorders experience them. During a panic attack, a person suddenly experiences an overwhelming feeling of fear accompanied by physical symptoms such as a pounding heart, sweating, trouble breathing, trembling, or feeling dizzy. Someone having a panic attack might feel like they are having a heart attack or asthma attack, or like they are losing control. Panic attacks often occur “out of the blue” and can last from a few minutes to half an hour, with most reaching a peak within 10 minutes.

## Warning signs

Considering the significant life changes associated with adolescence and early adulthood (e.g., transitioning to new schools, navigating romantic relationships and peer groups, increasing independence), it can be difficult at times to differentiate normal and expected stress responses from an anxiety disorder. Furthermore, an anxiety disorder might develop quite abruptly (e.g., after an adverse life event) or insidiously over time, which can then often go unrecognised by the people around them. If you notice any signs of anxiety that have lasted for an extended period of time and are impacting on the young person’s daily life or are causing them distress, they could indicate that the young person is in need of support for anxiety. Given the different types of anxiety disorders and the broad range of symptoms of anxiety, there is a variety of warning signs that may appear, including:

- Emotional signs:
  - Expressing persistent worries or excessive fears
  - Increased irritability
- Cognitive signs:
  - Showing difficulty concentrating, making decisions or remembering things, or being easily distracted
  - Always expecting the worst to happen (e.g., catastrophising)
  - Expressing worry that seems excessive in relation to the situation
  - Finding it difficult to stop worrying (e.g., even when they recognise that it is irrational)

- Behavioural signs:
  - Avoidance of situations that are anxiety-provoking (e.g. new situations)
  - Avoiding social situations, being socially isolated or extremely shy
  - Seeming unable to relax (e.g., seeming restless/tense)
  - Problems with work/school, social or family life
- Physical signs
  - Experiencing panic attacks (see above)
  - Appearing constantly tired or reporting trouble with their sleep (e.g., because they are up at night ruminating and find it difficult to “switch off”)
  - Reporting muscle tension, pounding heart, shortness of breath, or shaking
  - Frequent somatic/body complaints (e.g., missing classes because of a sore stomach, nausea, headache)

If you notice a change or something out of the ordinary in a young person that is not mentioned above, it may still be a sign of a mental health concern. If in doubt, talk to the young person about how they are coping and let them know that you are there to support them. Even if the young person does not want to talk to you, it does not hurt to get a second opinion about the young person’s behaviour. Reach out to a colleague, parent, or even a mental health professional to discuss what you’ve noticed, as appropriate.

**Anxiety disorders also have a younger age of onset than most other mental health problems and approximately 50% of people with an anxiety disorder experience their first symptoms by the age of 11 years.**

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## Talking to a Young Person About Anxiety

If you are worried about a young person's mental health, it is important that you talk with them about your concerns. This can help you get a better idea of how they are coping and what support they may need. It is important to notice the signs and offer assistance as young people often do not seek professional help for mental health problems (3) and those with an anxiety disorder in particular often wait a long time before they seek help (4). It can be especially challenging for a young person who is experiencing anxiety to speak with an adult and building rapport can facilitate this process. In talking with the young person, be patient and listen to their fears and concerns in an open and non-judgmental manner, and take them seriously.

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## Seeking Professional Help

If left unmanaged, mild anxiety can get much worse and seriously impact a person's quality of life and wellbeing. There are effective psychological therapies for anxiety in young people and the sooner they get help, the better their chances of recovery. Treatment for anxiety may vary slightly depending on the type of disorder, but commonly involves seeing a psychologist for a talking therapy like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), either individually or in a small group setting. Medication is not routinely prescribed for the treatment of anxiety disorders in young people but may be helpful in some circumstances if appropriate and under careful monitoring for side effects.

If you are concerned that a young person may be experiencing an anxiety disorder, you should encourage them to seek professional help. A good place for a young person to start seeking help is

their General Practitioner (GP). They will be able to provide them with more information on what's going on, what supports are available and refer them to an appropriate service if required. Some GPs prefer having a longer appointment time to discuss mental health concerns, so it is a good idea to specify at the time of making the appointment that the reason for the visit is to discuss a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan.

## Working with Young People Experiencing Anxiety

It may be that you are already working with a young person who is seeking, or has sought professional help for anxiety. It is important to keep in mind that anxiety is often associated with avoidance behaviours (e.g., school refusal), which can not only perpetuate their anxiety and interfere with the young person developing more adaptive coping behaviours, but also have a significant adverse impact on their everyday functioning. You may find that you can offer practical suggestions to help them cope with their difficulties, for example, by providing reassurance and highlighting their strengths (e.g., reminding them of previous occasions where they have managed to cope with other difficult situations), promoting relaxation techniques and activities that they enjoy (e.g., listening to music), breaking down overwhelming tasks into more manageable steps or allowing extra time to complete tasks, as appropriate.

## When a Young Person is at Risk

Anxiety is linked to a higher risk of depression, problematic substance use, suicidality and self-harm (5-7). Some young people might use alcohol or drugs to help them cope with their anxiety (e.g., to feel more confident during social events) and these behaviours can exacerbate and complicate their current symptoms over time (e.g., by increasing impulsivity and impairing judgment, or creating dependency).

If you are worried about a young person feeling particularly low and hopeless, it is important to ask them directly whether they have ever had thoughts that life is not worth living, or if they have had thoughts of harming themselves. While it may be difficult, it is very important to raise this with them, as directly asking a young person if they are thinking of taking their own life is the only way to assess suicide risk (8). There is also no evidence to indicate that talking to a young person about suicidal thoughts is harmful (9).

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While the majority of young people who have suicidal thoughts do not go on to end their lives, reports of suicidal ideation should be taken seriously as a sign of a mental health problem that warrants professional assessment. **If you believe a young person is in need of immediate support, contact emergency services by calling 000 or taking them to an emergency department.** Otherwise, refer or encourage them to seek professional support as above.

## Taking Care of Yourself

As a person who is working with young people as part of your professional role, it is important that you remember to also look after yourself, especially when supporting a young person with a mental health concern. Supporting someone through a tough time can be stressful, so remember to use the supports available to you at work, and continue to do activities that lower your stress, keep you energized, and maintain your wellbeing. If you feel like you are in need of professional help, your GP can provide support.

## For further information regarding mental health:

[www.orygen.org.au](http://www.orygen.org.au)

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

<http://au.professionals.reachout.com>

<https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines>

[www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

[www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)

[www.oyh.org.au](http://www.oyh.org.au)

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This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, always seek medical advice.