

# What are stress and anxiety?

Most people experience stress and anxiety from time to time. Stress is any demand placed on your brain or physical body. People can report feeling stressed when multiple competing demands are placed on them. The feeling of being stressed can be triggered by an event that makes you feel frustrated or nervous. Anxiety is a feeling of fear, worry, or unease. It can be a reaction to stress, or it can occur in people who are unable to identify significant stressors in their life.

Stress and anxiety are not always bad. In the short term, they can help you overcome a challenge or dangerous situation. Examples of everyday stress and anxiety include worrying about finding a job, feeling nervous before a big test, or being embarrassed in certain social situations. If we did not experience some anxiety we might not be motivated to do things that we need to do (for instance, studying for that big test!).

However, if stress and [anxiety](#) begin interfering with your daily life, it may indicate a more serious issue. If you are avoiding situations due to irrational fears, constantly worrying, or experiencing severe anxiety about a traumatic event weeks after it happened, it may be time to seek help.

# What do stress and anxiety feel like?

Stress and anxiety can produce both physical and psychological [symptoms](#). People experience stress and anxiety differently. Common physical symptoms include:

- stomachache
- muscle tension
- headache
- rapid breathing
- fast heartbeat
- sweating
- shaking
- dizziness
- frequent urination
- change in appetite
- trouble sleeping
- diarrhea
- fatigue

Stress and anxiety can cause mental or emotional symptoms in addition to physical ones. These can include:

- feelings of impending doom
- panic or nervousness, especially in social settings
- difficulty concentrating
- irrational anger
- restlessness

People who have stress and anxiety over long periods of time may experience negative related health outcomes. They are more likely to develop heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and may even develop depression and panic disorder.

## **What causes stress and anxiety?**

For most people, stress and anxiety come and go. They usually occur after particular life events, but then go away.

### **Common causes**

Common stressors include:

- moving
- starting a new school or job
- having an illness or injury
- having a friend or family member who is ill or injured
- death of a family member or friend
- getting married
- having a baby

## **Drugs and medications**

Drugs that contain stimulants may make the symptoms of stress and anxiety worse. Regular use of caffeine, illicit drugs such as cocaine, and even [alcohol](#) can also make symptoms worse.

Prescription medications that can make symptoms worse include:

- thyroid medications
- asthma inhalers
- diet pills

## **Stress- and anxiety-related disorders**

Stress and anxiety that occur frequently or seem out of proportion to the stressor may be signs of an anxiety disorder.

An estimated 40 million Americans live with some type of anxiety disorder.

People with these disorders may feel anxious and stressed on a daily basis and for prolonged periods of time. These disorders include the following:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)** is a common anxiety disorder characterized by uncontrollable worrying. Sometimes people worry about bad things happening to them or their loved ones, and at other times they may not be able to identify any source of worry.
- **Panic disorder** is a condition that causes panic attacks, which are moments of extreme fear accompanied by a pounding heart, shortness of breath, and a fear of impending doom.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a condition that causes flashbacks or anxiety as the result of a traumatic experience.
- **Social phobia** is a condition that causes intense feelings of anxiety in situations that involve interacting with others.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder** is a condition that causes repetitive thoughts and the compulsion to complete certain ritual actions.

# When to seek help

If you're having thoughts about harming yourself or others, you should seek immediate medical help. Stress and anxiety are treatable conditions and there are many resources, strategies, and treatments that can help. If you're unable to control your worries, and stress is impacting your daily life, talk to your doctor.

## Techniques to manage stress and anxiety

It's normal to experience stress and anxiety from time to time, and there are strategies you can use to make them more manageable. Pay attention to how your body and mind respond to stressful and anxiety-producing situations. Next time a stressful experience occurs, you'll be able to anticipate your reaction and it may be less disruptive.

### Managing everyday stress and anxiety

Certain lifestyle changes can help alleviate symptoms of stress and anxiety. These techniques can be used along with medical treatments for anxiety. Techniques to reduce stress and anxiety include:

- eating a balanced, healthy diet
- limiting caffeine and alcohol consumption
- getting enough sleep
- getting regular exercise
- meditating
- scheduling time for hobbies
- keeping a diary of your feelings
- practicing deep breathing
- recognizing the factors that trigger your stress
- talking to a friend

Be mindful if you tend to use substances like alcohol or drugs as ways to cope with stress and anxiety. This can lead to serious substance abuse issues that can make stress and anxiety worse.

## **Seeking professional help for stress and anxiety**

There are many ways to seek treatment for stress and anxiety. If you feel like you're unable to cope with stress and anxiety, your primary care provider may suggest that you see a mental health provider. They may use psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy, to help you work through your stress and anxiety. Your therapist may also teach you applied relaxation techniques to help you manage stress.

**Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** is a popular and effective method used to manage anxiety. This type of therapy teaches you to recognize anxious thoughts and behaviors and change them into more positive ones.

**Exposure therapy** and **systematic desensitization** can be effective in treating phobias. They involve gradually exposing you to anxiety-provoking stimuli to help manage your feelings of fear.

## Medications

Your primary care provider may also recommend [medication](#) to help treat a diagnosed anxiety disorder. These may include [selective-serotonin reuptake inhibitors](#) (SSRIs) such as [sertraline](#) (Zoloft) or [paroxetine](#) (Paxil). Sometimes providers use [anti-anxiety medications](#) (benzodiazepines), such as [diazepam](#) (Valium) or [lorazepam](#) (Ativan), but these approaches are generally used on a short-term basis due to the risk of addiction.



# What is the long-term outlook for stress and anxiety?

Stress and anxiety can be unpleasant to deal with. They can also have negative effects on your physical health if untreated for long periods of time. While some amount of stress and anxiety in life is expected and shouldn't be cause for concern, it's important to recognize when the stress in your life is causing negative consequences. If you feel like your stress and anxiety are becoming unmanageable, seek professional help or ask others to help you find the support you need.