

Anxiety

Welcome

Welcome to the Behavioral Health Awareness Module on Anxiety Disorders. Additional resources are available by selecting the Resources link in the top right corner of the window. If you have visual or auditory assistance needs, please select the Accessibility On/Off button for help with this training.

In This Training

This table of contents provides an outline for what you will learn in this training. We will help you re-evaluate misconceptions you may have about anxiety, identify signs and symptoms of anxiety disorders, and understand the effects anxiety has on an individual's life. We invite you to explore the following chapters that address questions you may have about the topic. You also have the option to move freely about the module using the player menu on the left-hand side of the window. You are free to start, stop, or pause the module at any time.

Anxiety in America

Over 40 million adult Americans have an anxiety disorder, making this type of mental health condition the most common among those over 18 years of age. It is highly likely that you know or have met someone with an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders usually begin during late childhood or early adolescence, but they can develop at any age. Unfortunately, more than 60% of those struggling with anxiety disorders do not receive treatment. This is a true tragedy because these conditions are extremely treatable. We hope that increasing education about anxiety and the multiple treatments available will result in more people getting the help they need.

Famous People with Anxiety Disorders

Although anxiety can be difficult to live with, many people with anxiety are able to manage their condition and be successful.

Adaptive Responses

Everyone feels nervous, or anxious, from time to time. We all worry. And everyone can think of situations that they would prefer to avoid. Although “fear” and “anxiety” are sometimes used interchangeably, they are slightly different. Fear comes from the feeling of direct or immediate danger. Anxiety is your body’s response to a possible danger or a perceived threat. Both can result in feelings of nervousness, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, difficulty focusing, shakiness, and other symptoms.

Fear and anxiety, in specific circumstances, are nothing to worry about. Fear triggers our natural “flight, fight, or freeze” response, which prepares us to either flee from or stay and fight a serious threat. But sometimes, people have fear and anxiety responses that are triggered in the absence of threats, or they may perceive a threat as more dangerous than it actually is. For people who struggle with anxiety conditions, their fear and worry interferes with their ability to function and compromises their ability to enjoy life.

Anxious Thoughts

Even when things are wonderful, I’m always waiting for something horrible to happen

Misconceptions About Anxiety

Click each sign to learn about common misconceptions about anxiety.

Misconception 1

People with anxiety should avoid situations that cause them stress.

Life is stressful. Avoiding stressful situations robs people of opportunities to learn how to effectively manage their anxiety and reinforces the belief that these situations pose a threat when they may not.

Misconception 2

Anxiety isn’t a real illness.

Brain imaging studies look different in people who live with generalized anxiety disorder and social anxiety disorder compared to people without the condition. Genetics, life experiences, and a person’s temperament, or the way they generally behave and react, are thought to contribute to the development of anxiety disorders. People with panic

attacks may be more prone to negative reactions or more sensitive to stress. A person with generalized anxiety disorder may have a more timid personality or more awareness of potential danger.

Misconception 3

Everyone experiences anxiety the same way.

Anxiety can vary from person to person. Some people may not feel comfortable interacting in small social gatherings but feel comfortable giving a large presentation to strangers. Some people may feel dizzy, short of breath, nauseated, and sweaty while having a panic attack; others may feel numb and disconnected from their body.

Misconception 4

People can always tell when someone has an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety can appear differently in different people. Not everyone who has an anxiety disorder appears anxious.

"My anxiety is silent. You wouldn't even notice a change on the outside, but I'm honestly so stressed I can't even manage simple tasks. People call me lazy when, in reality, I'm just overwhelmed."

Misconception 5

Social anxiety is the same as being introverted or shy.

It is true that people with social anxiety, those who are introverted, and those who are shy all tend to avoid interacting with large groups. However, the motivation for their behavior is different. Introverted people value their time away from others to recharge. Shy people have difficulty talking with people they don't know. Neither group experiences the extreme distress that those with social phobia experience around others.

Misconception 6

Reassurance will help the anxiety go away.

Reassurance is often not helpful and may even feel invalidating. It can be more helpful to acknowledge the person's fears and anxiety and help them learn how to cope with the situation if a fear materializes.

Pauline

I'm Pauline. I just finished cosmetology school. I've always wanted to be a hairdresser, and I'm really excited about my new career. I'm also a little worried - but that's nothing new, because I've always been "a worrier."

In high school, I was always worried about being late to class, even though I had never been late. I worried constantly about failing tests, even though I was a great student and always passed. While at school, I would worry that members of my family would be in terrible accidents and that I might never see them again. Often, my worrying would interfere with my ability to concentrate in class and to have fun with my friends. I had difficulty sleeping at night because I would stay up worrying about the next day. I was restless, tired, and irritable.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Although Pauline didn't realize it, she had many of the symptoms of a condition called generalized anxiety disorder. Generalized anxiety disorder occurs in 6.8 million adult Americans, or 3.1% of the population. People with generalized anxiety disorder tend to worry excessively about life events. In fact, worry serves a useful purpose for many of us. Worrying is future oriented. It helps us identify outcomes we wish to avoid and take productive steps to avoid them. However, someone with generalized anxiety disorder worries with an intensity and frequency that negates any benefit that might come from it.

Reflection on Symptoms

After listening to her story, which of the symptoms of generalized anxiety do you think Pauline had?

Select all that apply.

Correct	Choice
Yes	Excessive worrying
Yes	Difficulty sleeping
Yes	Increased irritability

No	Increased self-esteem
No	Increased energy
Yes	Restlessness

Correct

Good thinking. Pauline exhibited excessive worrying, difficulty sleeping, increased irritability, and restlessness.

Incorrect

Not quite. Pauline exhibited excessive worrying, difficulty sleeping, increased irritability, and restlessness.

Pauline

I didn't talk to others about how much I worried because I didn't want to seem "weird." I was afraid they would judge me. I even avoided social situations because I was afraid I would do something embarrassing. When I was called on in class, I would often start trembling and feeling light-headed. I missed out on many parties and good times with my friends. My grades started to suffer because I avoided doing presentations and participating in discussions.

Social Anxiety Disorder

Anxiety disorders often occur together. In addition to having symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, Pauline also had symptoms of social anxiety disorder. Social anxiety disorder used to be called social phobia. People with social anxiety disorder have intense fear or discomfort in social situations. They fear being judged negatively by others or embarrassing themselves. Their discomfort is so severe that it often causes them to avoid social situations. It is usual for teenagers to feel self-conscious in new social situations and when meeting new people. It is normal to have "butterflies" before going out on a first date. It is not usual for teenagers to completely avoid social situations. When the anxiety or discomfort triggered by being in social situations is so severe that it interferes with a person's ability to enjoy participating in them, then it would be reasonable to seek a professional evaluation to see whether social anxiety disorder is present.



Pauline

I thought after graduating from high school things would get better. I wouldn't have to worry about homework and tests or going to "cool parties." I took a job as a receptionist for a local law office because I thought it would be easy. I would just answer phones, transfer calls, and take messages. It was not easy, and I hated it. I continued to worry just as much as I did in high school. I just started worrying about different things. I worried that I wasn't doing a good enough job. I worried the attorneys, the staff, and the clients were criticizing me behind my back. I wasn't sleeping well. I felt irritable and tired during the day, which made my job even more difficult.

Within months of starting my job, I started having these episodes of severe anxiety. They would come on out of nowhere. All of a sudden, I would feel overwhelmed with fear. My pulse would quicken and my chest would hurt. I would feel dizzy and start sweating and trembling. One time, I even went to the ER because I thought I was having a heart attack. The doctor ran all kinds of tests and told me that my heart was fine but that I had anxiety. He referred me to a local mental health clinic.

Reflection on Panic Attacks

Pauline started suffering from what is known as "panic attacks." Panic attacks are discrete episodes of severe intense fear with a sense of doom that are associated with physical symptoms.

Based on Pauline's story, what are some common symptoms of panic attacks?

Select all that apply.

Correct	Choice
No	Headaches
No	Sweating
Yes	Increased heart rate
Yes	Dizziness
Yes	Chest pain
Yes	Shakiness

Correct

Good thinking. Increased heart rate, chest pain, dizziness, and tremulousness are symptoms of panic attacks.

Incorrect

Not quite. Increased heart rate, chest pain, dizziness, and tremulousness are symptoms of panic attacks.

Panic Attacks

Sometimes people are able to identify a “trigger” that started the attack. For example, some people get panic attacks when they are in enclosed spaces, such as elevators or airplanes. Other times, they occur out of the blue. They can even occur at night and wake people from sleeping. They can occur once a year or multiple times a day. The frequency varies, and the amount of time they last can vary as well.

It is important to know that most people will experience a panic attack over the course of their lives. Panic attacks in and of themselves are **not** dangerous. Our bodies are designed to experience fear. However, people can misinterpret a panic attack as dangerous. Our fear response increases our heart rate, and some may see this sudden increase in heart rate as a sign of danger, or think that something is wrong with their heart. Sometimes they start fearing the next panic attack because their symptoms are so uncomfortable. When people start being afraid of their next panic attack and avoiding activities because they are afraid they will have an attack, then a diagnosis of Panic Disorder is considered.

Ways to Manage Anxiety

Fortunately, there is a lot of support and multiple treatment options available for managing anxiety. These include medications, psychotherapy (or talk therapy), and lifestyle modifications.

Click each circle to view more.

Medication

The most common types of medications used to treat anxiety are antidepressants, benzodiazepines, and beta-blockers. Certain brain chemicals that are involved in depression are also involved in anxiety. In fact, some estimates show that 60% of people



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with anxiety will experience symptoms of depression. Some medications that help decrease depressive symptoms also help decrease anxiety symptoms. In fact, it is common for antidepressants to be given to treat anxiety disorders. Although they are very effective for the treatment of anxiety disorders, they can take weeks to start working.

Benzodiazepines are also given to decrease anxiety symptoms. They are particularly helpful for panic attacks because they start to work quickly. Benzodiazepines are sometimes used to help “bridge” the time until the antidepressant starts working. They must be used with extreme caution, however, because they can be addictive and can lose their effectiveness over time.

People who are trained to prescribe these medications are educated about which medications are the best fit for each person and their symptoms. Sometimes it can take a while to find the best medical combination for a person’s needs. It is important to remain patient and work together with a prescriber.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy (or talk therapy) can be as effective as medication for treating anxiety conditions. Certain forms of talk therapy, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (or CBT) have been proven to be particularly helpful. During CBT, people work with a therapist to look at how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are related. They also look at how their thoughts, which may not be accurate or logical, are influencing their feelings or behavior. The client and therapist work together to consider alternative ways of thinking about things and to change the person’s behavior. Over time, these changes help decrease anxiety.

With the arrival of the smartphone, the availability of psychotherapy for anxiety has increased substantially. Now there are even apps people can download to gain access to a therapist or to learn techniques for managing their anxiety. Please see ADAA Reviewed Mental Health Apps from the Resources tab.

Lifestyle Modifications

Even without the help of medication or talk therapy, there are multiple things people can do to help manage or decrease their anxiety symptoms.

Many other strategies exist in addition to these. For more resources, please see Coping Strategies and 50 Strategies to Beat Anxiety in the Resources section.

Click View Strategies to learn more.

- Take a time out (Yoga, mediation, walking)
- Get enough rest
- Eat regular snacks
- Exercise regularly
- Take deep breaths
- Watch something funny
- Accept that some things are out of your control

Pauline

I called the clinic and made an appointment with a psychiatric nurse practitioner. This is a nurse practitioner who specializes in treating mental health conditions. The nurse practitioner asked me questions about my mood and my tendency to worry, among other things. She told me that she thought I definitely was living with anxiety. She recommended starting medication and talk therapy to treat my symptoms. I felt relieved to hear that there was something I could do to relieve my suffering. I felt like my worrying had controlled me for years, rather than the other way around.

Soon after I started treatment, I noticed that I felt less nervous and afraid. I had more energy to do things and my outlook became more positive. I decided to quit my job as a receptionist and go to cosmetology school to pursue a career in something that I genuinely love. I still have anxiety, but my symptoms are better controlled. I am enjoying life a lot more!

Ben

I'm Ben. I am 36-years old, married, and work from home as a computer programmer. I don't have many friends, and I try to avoid social activities. My partner and I met through an online dating app and we married soon after meeting in person.

Recently, my partner has voiced frustration and concern because I never want to go to social gatherings. We are always declining invitations to social functions because I am uncomfortable meeting new people. I avoided group gatherings in high school and college as well because I was afraid others would negatively judge me.

My partner keeps trying to get me to talk with a therapist because he is concerned that my fears are interfering with our ability to live life fully. I've made and canceled the therapist appointment twice now because I am afraid the therapist will think I'm weird. My partner realized what was happening, so he drove me to the therapy appointment and, with his encouragement, I felt comfortable enough to share my fears with the therapist.

The therapist explained that I likely have a condition called Social Anxiety Disorder, which affects 15 million American adults. The therapist also said that therapy can be very helpful for treating this condition and recommended that I see my primary care doctor to discuss starting a medication to manage my symptoms.

I continued seeing the therapist and started taking medication to manage the anxiety. Over the next 6 months, I felt confident enough to start attending more social functions with my partner. Our relationship has improved because of this, and we are both happier and more fulfilled.

You Are Not Alone!

Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health condition in adult Americans. Fortunately, many people with anxiety are able to lead successful and fulfilling lives with the help of medication, therapy, and other strategies that can be put in place. Whether you are facing an anxiety disorder or may know someone who is, know that you are not alone, and help is available.

Knowledge Check Instructions

Ryan is a 46-year old man who works as a car salesman. He is very good at his job. He gets to work early and stays late. He worries about whether his customers are satisfied and whether his managers are pleased with his performance. His worrying keeps him up at night. He has always worried. He remembers worrying about his family while he was at school when he was a kid. Because he doesn't sleep at night, he feels tired all the time. Yet, he can't sit still. His worrying interferes with his ability to enjoy his time with his family when he is home. His wife tells him that she is concerned he is going to have health problems because he worries so much. She asks him to go see his doctor for a check-up.

Once you begin the Knowledge Check, click the pencil to review Ryan's story.

Are you ready to help Ryan manage his anxiety?

Knowledge Check Question 1

Select all that apply. What symptoms of an anxiety disorder does Ryan show?

Correct	Choice
Yes	His worrying causes him significant distress in his life
No	His anxiety is obvious to others in his life
Yes	His worrying leads to difficulty sleeping, fatigue, restlessness
Yes	His worrying interferes with his ability to enjoy his relationships

Correct

Good thinking. Ryan’s worrying causes him significant distress, leads to difficulty sleeping, and interferes with his ability to enjoy his relationships.

Incorrect

Not quite. Ryan’s worrying causes him significant distress, leads to difficulty sleeping, and interferes with his ability to enjoy his relationships.

Knowledge Check Question 2

What strategies can Ryan use to cope with his anxiety?

Correct	Choice
X	Strive to get enough rest and eat balanced meals
X	Meditate or focus on deep breathing
	Take time to withdraw from relationships to focus on treatment
X	Exercise regularly

Correct

Good thinking. Ryan can strive to get enough rest, eat balanced meals, meditate or focus on deep breathing, and exercise regularly.

Incorrect

Not quite. Ryan can strive to get enough rest, eat balanced meals, meditate or focus on deep breathing, and exercise regularly.

Knowledge Check Question 3

Anxiety disorders look similar in every person who struggles with an anxiety condition. True or False?

Correct	Choice
No	True
Yes	False

Correct

Good thinking. This is a common misconception. Anxiety and its symptoms can vary from person to person.

Incorrect

Good thinking. This is a common misconception. Anxiety and its symptoms can vary from person to person.

Knowledge Check Question 4

Anxiety disorders rarely occur in children. True or False?

Correct	Choice
No	True
Yes	False

Correct

Good thinking. Actually, anxiety disorders usually develop in childhood or adolescence.



Incorrect

Not quite. Actually, anxiety disorders usually develop in childhood or adolescence.

Knowledge Check Question 5

It is generally easy to tell if someone is living with an anxiety. True or False?

Correct	Choice
No	True
Yes	False

Correct

Good thinking. This is another misconception. It is not easy to tell if someone is living with an anxiety because the symptoms vary and not everyone with anxiety appears to be anxious.

Incorrect

Not quite. This is another misconception. It is not easy to tell if someone is living with an anxiety because the symptoms vary and not everyone with anxiety appears to be anxious.