

Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

What is anxiety?

Most of us would recognise at least one of the following names: Johnny Depp, Abraham Lincoln and Adele. These are names of only a few well-known people who have suffered from a form of anxiety disorder. Anxiety is universal. It's a fact that people experience feelings of worry, nervousness, fear, apprehension or unease at various moments in their lives. The most common symptoms of anxiety can be a part of normal life. At low levels anxiety can improve our alertness and quicken our preparation for action, helping our performance in familiar tasks like running or meeting an essay deadline. Anxiety can also act as a protective mechanism preventing us from getting into risky situations (ever heard of the fight or flight response?). Most students experience anxiety as part of feeling vulnerable just before or during tests and examinations, interviews and public speaking assignments (think of those sweaty palms and the butterflies in your stomach).

People experience anxiety in different intensities, with persistent and generalised anxiety being the most debilitating. Severe anxiety is present when the symptoms interfere with your thoughts, behaviour or feelings to the extent that you cannot function normally. For example, when fear of a situation, someone or something is either constant or suddenly overwhelming, anxiety has become problematic and you might be suffering from a specific type of anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders differ by what symptoms result. Some categories of anxiety disorders are:

- Generalised anxiety disorder: This involves consistent, long-lasting worry and tension. It is anxiety that is excessive or unrealistic even when there seems to be little or nothing to provoke it, or else there is preoccupation with worry about a number of events all at once (like home, school, work). Symptoms include restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, insomnia, feeling easily fatigued, and difficulty concentrating.
- Panic attack: Feelings of intense apprehension or fear that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning, yet can last several hours. Symptoms include sweating, shaking, nausea, dizziness,

confusion, chest pain, palpitations (unusually strong or irregular heartbeats), or a feeling of choking.

- **Social anxiety disorder**: Feelings of intense and overwhelming worry and self-consciousness about otherwise ordinary social situations or interactions. The anxiety often centres on fear of being judged by others or behaving in a way that might cause embarrassment or lead to ridicule. Symptoms include difficulty speaking, sweating, blushing or trembling.
- **Specific phobias**: Intense fear triggered by a specific object or situation, such as snakes, heights or flying. The level of fear is usually inappropriate to the circumstances and may cause the person to avoid commonplace situations, even though they may understand that their fear is disproportional.

What to do if you suffer from anxiety

1. **Seek out a supportive professional**: The earlier you seek support the better your chances are for recapturing your best behaviour and performance. The Rhodes University Counselling Centre is located in the Steve Biko Building and is open from 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, tel. 046-603 7070 During after-hours and weekends, an emergency call service is available on 082 803 0177. Contact us and you can discuss your anxiety with a trained therapist.
2. **Self-treatment**: A main cause of anxiety is a stressful life style. Physical life-style changes and mindfulness can effectively reduce anxiety symptoms. By keeping an eye on your stress levels, managing deadlines, and taking time to rest and relax you can reduce your anxiety levels significantly. Participating in specific relaxation activities, such as mediation or exercise, can also greatly help to reduce your anxiety.

How to Momentarily Calm Anxious Feelings:

1. Put your hand on your abdomen.
2. Take a slow, deep breath, and notice your abdomen expanding.
3. Hold that breath for several seconds.
4. Then, slowly breathe out while letting your shoulders droop.
5. As you exhale, think the word 'relax' to yourself.
6. Repeat this pattern of breathing several times.

<http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/overcoming-anxiety-for-dummies-cheat-sheet.html>

3. Medication: In consultation with a physician or therapist, another treatment option is medication; many suffers of an anxiety disorder choose therapy first, but the choice is up to the individual.

How can you reduce your risk of experiencing anxiety?

- Reduce consumption of caffeine, including coffee, tea, soft drinks and chocolate.
- Eat healthily.
- Stopping smoking.
- Exercise regularly.
- Aim for a regular sleep pattern.
- Seek counselling and support after a traumatic or disturbing experience.
- Avoid dependence on alcohol, cannabis or other recreational drugs.



Have a look at The South African Depression and Anxiety Group's website for more information: <http://www.sadag.org/>