

Do I Have an Anxiety Disorder?

“I started with eating disorders, depression, anxiety, depression, anxiety, PTSD, depression, anxiety. It's this rollercoaster.”

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the United States, affecting nearly 1 in 5 adults. The most common types of anxiety disorders include: Generalized Anxiety Disorder; Social Anxiety Disorder; Panic Disorder, and Phobias. It's not uncommon for people like Sarah, who have an anxiety disorder, to also suffer from other mental health conditions including depression and PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

“You know it's not you have one, and that's it. It's your good days, bad days, good months, bad months. Some for me have been easier to cope with than others.”

“Stress does tend to be a bit of a fueling source for anxiety disorders. But then there are other things that kind of predispose people and many people, many thought leaders in the anxiety world believe that there's probably some sort of biological predisposition that make people more vulnerable to anxiety disorders.”

While the risk factors vary from person to person, you may be at risk for an anxiety disorder if: You were very shy as a child; You have a history of anxiety or other mental health issues in your family; You've been exposed to stress or trauma as a child; You have certain health conditions such as thyroid problems or an irregular heartbeat.

“It's really a lot of different factors that are kind of interacting with one another, kind of co-occurring at the same time to create a perfect storm that contributes to a person developing generalized anxiety disorder. Some of those factors are completely outside of an individual's control.”

With generalized anxiety disorder, a person's life is filled with worry, sometimes for hours each day, making it hard to concentrate on school or work or everyday living. Sarah, who happens to be a mental health counselor, says she's lucky to have an understanding boss.

“So, when I first started doing trainings or going to conferences, talking in front of large groups, particularly about things on a personal level, sometimes I would make excuses. Lie, tell white lies even. Maybe exaggerate the extent to which I wasn't feeling all that well. Fortunately, I'm in a job here where they're very accommodating. They recognize people have mental health challenges and so they work around them.”

Each anxiety disorder has its own unique symptoms, but all include excessive, persistent worry or fear in situations that are not threatening. Other emotional symptoms may include: Feeling tense or jumpy; Restlessness; Irritability or Anticipating the worst result that can happen; Avoidance. There are physical symptoms, too: A racing heart or shortness of breath; Sweating, tremors and twitches; Headaches, fatigue or trouble sleeping, and an upset stomach, frequent urination or diarrhea.

Claudine Jackson lives with anxiety disorder, complicated by depression and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or OCD.

“I have a thing with dirt and dust and I only sleep on white towels, white sheets. I mean white sheets and pillowcases.”

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With Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Claudine has uncontrollable thoughts and behaviors that she repeats over and over. OCD can make her anxiety even worse.

“I have it more under control now, but I had gotten to the point which, if I didn't have everything perfectly neat and in order, my anxiety would just, I would get real nervous and start having problems breathing.”

In most cases, anxiety disorder and related illnesses, will improve with talk therapy or medications.

“There's also all sorts of different ways to treat anxiety disorders. Thankfully there are medications that are helpful. And for some people they get significant relief.”

“And sometimes it takes maybe one or two different types of meds for them to get your combination right. But when they get it right, it's going to be an amazing life for you.”

Adopting a healthy lifestyle, learning coping skills and using relaxation techniques can also help. The bottom line is to seek professional help if you think you are feeling overly anxious.