

FACTSHEET: ANXIETY & OLDER PEOPLE

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is the mind and body's reaction to stressful, dangerous, or unfamiliar situations. It is the sense of uneasiness, distress, or dread you feel before a significant event. A certain level of anxiety helps us stay alert and aware.

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia. On average 1 in 4 people will experience anxiety in their life. There are many ways to help manage anxiety and the sooner people with anxiety get support the more likely they are to recover.



Feelings of anxiety are a universal human experience, probably having evolved from the primitive "fight or flight" response seen in all animals. However, anxiety can also be experienced in the absence of an apparent external threat or because of situations and events that the individual finds unfamiliar or difficult. Indeed, events such as attending a health service can trigger feelings of anxiety, which can be manifested in a variety of ways. Anxiety affects various bodily systems and functions, but consistent among these are the often distressing physical or somatic, symptoms.

Factors that can increase an older person's risk of developing anxiety include:

An increase in physical health problems/conditions e.g., heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease. Chronic pain. Side-effects from medications. losses: relationships, independence, work and income, self-worth, mobility, and flexibility. Social isolation. Significant change in living arrangements e.g., moving from living independently to a care setting. Admission to hospital. Anniversaries and the memories they evoke.

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Signs and symptoms of anxiety in older people:

Behavioural

Avoiding objects or situations which cause anxiety. Urges to perform certain rituals in a bid to relieve anxiety. Not being assertive e.g., avoiding eye contact. Difficulty making decisions. Being startled easily.



“I am worried”

Feelings

Overwhelmed. Fear, particularly when facing certain objects, situations, or events. Worried about physical symptoms, such as fearing there is an undiagnosed medical problem. Overwhelming panic. Constantly tense or nervous. Dread, such as fearing that something bad is going to happen.



Anxiety is not a weakness of character – it’s a health issue just like any other. The good news is that effective treatments are available, and with the right support, you can recover.

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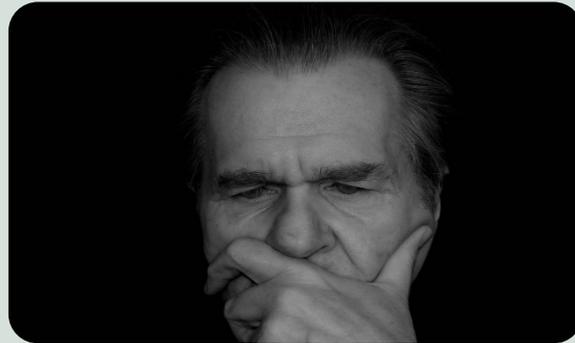
Thoughts

“I can’t control myself”

“I am going crazy”

“I am having upsetting flashbacks of traumatic events”

“I feel like I am about to die”



“People are judging me”

“I am finding it hard to stop worrying”

Physical symptoms

Increased heart rate/ racing heart. Vomiting, nausea, or pain in the stomach. Muscle tension and pain/ Numbness or tingling. Feeling detached from your physical self or surroundings. Having trouble sleeping. Sweating, shaking/ hot or cold flushes. Dizzy, lightheaded or faint.



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Relieving anxiety in older people:

1. **Social support:** Companionship can be incredibly useful in reducing anxiety. For those suffering from anxious feelings, it can be a source of great relief to know that someone is there to listen, to check up on anything concerning and provide pleasant interaction throughout the day.
2. **Calming exercises:** Concentrating on taking slow and even breaths can offer some immediate relief in anxious situations. Physical exercise has been proven to help anxiety sufferers. While physical activity can be a challenge for some older people, there are quite a few forms of low-impact exercise to choose from. They can try gentle yoga, tai chi, or going for walks. Listening to soothing sounds is another helpful coping strategy. Seniors can sit peacefully, relaxing all their muscles and calm breathing. Listening to quiet music, natural soundtracks like ocean waves or night-time forest noises. Listening to a radio program or audiobook whose narrator has a calming voice.
3. **Routine:** Routines are also beneficial for older people with anxious thoughts. Routines provide a predictable daily schedule, and this can be calming.
4. **Ease night time stress:** Older people can have trouble sleeping due to medication interactions, or because of physical ailments that make reclining or lying flat uncomfortable, but it is common for older people to struggle with sleep due to mental stressors. During the night, if seniors are upset or concerned about symptoms they're experiencing, or a strange sound they've heard the anxiety requires and deserves attention, just as a physical ailment does.



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Connections matter. Strong ties with family, friends and the community provide us with happiness, security, support, and a sense of purpose. Being connected to others is important for our mental and physical wellbeing and can be a protective factor against anxiety.

Loneliness is a feeling of a lack of companionship or quality relationships with other people. As we get older, changes in our personal circumstances and lifestyle can result in us feeling less connected to others and increase the risk of us becoming lonely.

If you want to be closer to others in your existing relationships, you can work on improving your communication and emotional connectedness; for example, learning new skills to help you talk about the important things in life with loved ones, or even just making more time for regular conversations.

