

# Anxiety Disorders and Young People

Anxiety disorders are common. Around 1 in 10 young Australians aged between 18-25 will experience an anxiety disorder in any given 12 month period, whilst for young people between 13-17, the figure is around 1 in 25. Unfortunately anxiety disorders are commonly under-recognised and under-treated.

The consequences of untreated anxiety can be substantial, interfering with the person's capacity to achieve their full potential.

## What is Anxiety?

The word anxiety is used to describe the mental, physical, and behavioural responses to feared and threatening situations. Anxiety is a normal response experienced by everyone at different times in their life. The reaction may include increased heart rate, sweating, trembling or the restlessness, among many other things.

In contrast, a person experiencing an anxiety disorder will usually have feelings of anxiety that are more intense and persistent, accompanied by a broad range of changes in their thoughts, behaviours and physical well-being which cause distress and affect performance and enjoyment in a range of life areas.

## Types of anxiety disorder

There are many different types of anxiety disorder. These include:

- Specific phobias - eg fear of animals, heights, seeing blood
- Panic disorder – fear of collapse/sudden death
- Social phobia – fear of negative comment from others
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder – fear of contamination, or harm to others
- Post-traumatic stress disorder – fear of repetition of the initial trauma
- Generalised anxiety disorder – fear of everything

## What to look for

Whilst each disorder has its own specific pattern of symptoms, anxiety disorders have a number of features in common, in particular the physical response.

When our mind perceives some sort of danger, it automatically triggers the activation of our sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is that part of the nervous system which prepares people for action (the so-called flight or fight mechanism). This in turn creates a "state of tension" or "arousal" with increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, muscle

tension, sweats, shakes and a feeling of butterflies in the stomach.

People prone to anxiety will either be in a constant state of tension or have repeated intense bursts of tension/arousal called panic attacks.

Other common symptoms include are:

- Persistent worrying and fears out of proportion to the situation
- Inability to relax
- Avoidance of feared situations
- Excessive shyness
- Social isolation or being withdrawn
- Difficulties in concentration and attention
- Poor sleep
- Interference with working, social or family life

In general any young person who appears unusually fearful, uptight, or avoidant may have an anxiety problem. It is also common for anxiety problems to impact on a young people's school/work performance and peer relationships.

## Other problems

Many young people who develop anxiety problems become quite depressed about their problem and may simultaneously suffer from a depressive disorder.

## What can be done?

The different disorders require slightly different approaches to treatment. One of the most commonly used treatments for disorders such as panic disorder, social phobia and generalised anxiety disorder is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). In certain instances medication may also be required.

## What can you do?

Most young people in need of help seek support from people they know and trust. This usually means their peers, family members or other adults they perceive to be caring. They are generally reluctant to seek psychiatric help because of the stigma and myths associated with mental illness.

As a result young people are often more likely to seek psychiatric help within non-psychiatric settings, such as their own doctors, community health centres, youth workers, teachers and other non-government agencies. Because of this, professionals in these settings are extremely experienced in dealing with young people's emotional difficulties and can, in many instances, provide treatment for young young people with anxiety

disorders. However, sometimes young people need specialist treatment from a mental health service due to the severity of their symptoms.

## Advice and Referral

If you are working with a young person who you think may have an anxiety disorder and you are not sure what to do, it is always best to contact someone with experience in this field and discuss the situation with them. Referral to a GP, a trained counsellor or specialist mental health worker may be necessary.

## Services at ORYGEN Youth Health

ORYGEN Youth Health is able to assist some young people (15-24) with anxiety disorders who live in Western or Northwestern Melbourne.

To make a referral or get some advice contact the ORYGEN Triage worker on 1800 888 320 or via the paging service on 03 9483 4556.

For children and teenagers under 15 years of age contact RCH Mental Health Service on 1800 445 511.

For further information regarding mental health and information in other languages visit:

- [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- [www.sane.org.au](http://www.sane.org.au)
- [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)