



Common Anxiety Disorders ^[1]

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Anxiety takes many forms, from the everyday ways we imagine situations going wrong or stressing us out, to debilitating, life-altering disorders. Here we'll explore the many varieties of anxiety disorders, how they're diagnosed, and what challenges they present to people who live with them.

Anxiety and fear have distinct evolutionary functions as emotions. Too much of either can create mental and physical problems, and an excess of these problems may in turn lead to diagnosable anxiety disorders.

This may come as a surprise to you—that someone can experience so much anxiety that doctors and mental health professionals categorize their experiences as disorders. Then again, you may be someone who has, or know someone who has, an anxiety disorder. No matter which group you consider yourself part of, it's vital to understand what a "disorder" entails as opposed to simply feeling anxious or scared a little more than normal.

Psychological disorders take on many forms. They can be cognitive in nature (how we think), behavioral (the things we do), emotional- or mood-based, or personality-based. A mental disorder ^[3] is any combination of thinking and behavior that negatively and chronically affects a person's life.

As we've learned, anxiety and fear are emotions that all people experience ^[4]. Through a combination of life experiences and genetic predispositions, some people may come to experience anxiety and fear on such a continual basis that it impacts nearly every part of their lives. Some anxiety disorders make it very difficult for people to approach and make relationships with other people, for instance.

Other anxiety disorders stem from previous experiences of high-intensity fear and anxiety, such as instances of combat or abuse. And there are also anxiety disorders that may be harder to define—the person with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) ^[5], for instance, may be "put on edge" by a large variety of events that they interpret as stressful or cause them to feel immediate fear. Other people in the same situations may feel nothing out of the ordinary.

As with other mental disorders, there are many factors to consider. One prevalent item to keep in mind is that people with anxiety disorders do not choose to be more anxious than other people. There are still unfortunately many demeaning stigmas surrounding anxiety and fear that people outside the influence of these disorders misinterpret as "no big deal."

"Why don't you just get over it? It's only in your head!"

These attitudes likely come from a place of frustration, lack of personal experience, or prejudice about fear and anxiety being "controllable" feelings or feelings with no real purpose but to be overcome. For people living with anxiety disorders, the history of how they came to develop them may be trying and dramatic, indeed, or it could be the cumulative outcome of a lifetime of ignoring the physical, emotional, and environmental cues that caused them to become anxious in the first place. They may never have had access to information and mental health services in their community, and thus were not readily able to learn the ins-and-outs of these emotions and how best to cope with their more extreme incarnations.

The important thing to remember for this section is that:

A person experiencing an anxiety disorder did not choose to become this anxious and cannot just as easily choose to stop feeling this way.

Mental disorders puppetmaster the daily functions of the people who live through them. Holding onto the belief that a person with a mental disorder can merely "get over it" is to ignore and undermine the complex events that led them to that point. This point is especially powerful to internalize, especially in our modern world where most nations' people suffer from anxiety disorders above other debilitating conditions.

With an air of compassion and understanding in mind, this section outlines several of the most common anxiety disorders as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM), though their equivalencies can be found in the ICD [6] (International Classification of Diseases). These disorders include Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) [5], Social Anxiety Disorders [7], Panic Disorder [8], Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders [9], Trauma Disorders and PTSD [10], Depressive Disorders [11], and Phobias and Test Anxiety [12]. You'll learn how these disorders come about, how they are diagnosed, and the ways they affect the lives of people who endure them.

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