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The Physical & Psychological Risks of Anxiety

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Our psychological health is affected by fear and anxiety. There are many long-term consequences of ignoring symptoms of anxiety. This section highlights some of the major ones for your consideration.

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Physical Risks

It's well-known that prolonged anxiety and stress have negative effects on overall health. As we've seen, stress and anxiety can have short-term benefits, but too much of anything is detrimental to health. To read a little deeper ^[1] into the "stress is bad" mantra, here are some ways chronic anxiety and stress can wreak havoc on the body ^[2]. Hopefully, this list motivates you to take the small, cumulative steps and actions you need to acknowledge and manage anxiety and fear's influence:

- **Inhibited Immune System** – During normal stressful reactions to fear and anxiety, the body produces white blood cells. These are the cells which fight infections. While healthy white blood cell count is essential for health, chronic stress and anxiety lead to the overproduction and eventual suppression of white blood cell activity. The result? People living with constant anxiety and stress are more prone to infections of all kinds.
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More Frequent Skin Conditions – Fear's activation of the stress response releases many hormones which can negatively affect skin health. Psoriasis, hives, eczema, and acne may all exacerbate under prolonged anxiety.

- **Cardiovascular Disorders** – The fear response increases your heart rate and blood pressure. It also increases your body's lipid (fat) levels. Over time, and through repeated stress, these lipids may spike cholesterol levels and prompt atherosclerosis, a disease where the heart's blood vessels build up with fatty plaques, which may lead to heart disease. The chemical cortisol, released during the stress/fear response, can also lead to weight gain and diabetes. Lastly, certain "indirect" behaviors, such as coping through alcohol, overeating, or substance abuse, also damages heart health.
- **Gastrointestinal Disorders** – The stress response turns most digestive functions off to better aid the "fight, flight, or freeze" response. As a result, people with anxiety tend to experience diarrhea, excessive belching or gas, stomach cramps, and may even put themselves at greater risk for developing Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Stress that is chronic also affects appetite, which may lead to overeating, itself linked to everything from diabetes, strokes, and heart disease.
- **Respiratory Disorders** – Studies have shown that anxiety can exacerbate asthmatic symptoms. It has also been linked to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), with panic attacks reported alongside the condition. Though the relationship may not be causal, anxiety symptoms decrease life quality for people already suffering from respiratory disorders.
- **Musculoskeletal System** – When you are stressed or frightened, the muscles in your body tighten and contract. People with chronic anxiety often report mild to severe muscle aches and pains. Muscular spasms, migraines, and even joint dysfunction are associated with chronic muscle tension.
- **Sexual Dysfunction** – Both men and women's reproductive systems can be negatively affected by chronic stress and anxiety. The stress hormones released can increase menstrual disorders and discomfort, while men can experience erectile dysfunction. Sexual desire can also dissipate for both sexes as a result of the chemical aftereffects of anxiety.

Psychological/Lifestyle Risks

Later in the course, we will look at specific psychological risks connected with specific anxiety disorders [3]. For the time being, here is a brief look at some of the major areas [4] in which anxiety, if left unmanaged, can affect your psychological life:

- **Social Isolation/Lack of Support** – Anxiety can cripple a person's social life. In an effort to avoid feeling the physical or emotional results of anxiety, many people "cope" by forgoing social interactions. Without proper outlets, it can seem all the more isolating

to the anxiety sufferer.

- **Missed Opportunities** – Fear, anxiety, and stress can all infect the mind to convince itself not to express itself or do the things it used to love. Hobbies and interests take a back seat to the immediate need to protect oneself. As such, many anxiety sufferers continually exclude themselves from wonderful opportunities, or even everyday activities they used to love, in their fight to ignore or avoid feeling how they feel.
- **Dependence on Others** – Social support is important for anxiety sufferers [5], but anxiety can also cripple people's sense of self-efficacy. Depending on its severity, people may stop going to work or providing for themselves because their fears are so great. This puts strain on the people who take care of them and further reinforces their own sense of helplessness.
- **Negative Self-Image** – A chronically anxious person may feel they will never feel the way they used to. They may start to wonder what the point of even trying is and lack the confidence [6] they need to make even small steps toward recovery. Negative self-appraisal and low self-esteem are all-too-common tagalongs with fear and anxiety.
- **Develop Phobias** – Phobias (discussed here [7]) are fears of innocuous things that develop over time. An anxious person may develop many phobias—social, medical, physical—that they unwittingly provoke every time they avoid or demonize the situation.
- **Develop Anxiety Disorders** – Anxiety, whether from an early age, a traumatic experience, or the cumulative effects of fear and stress, can break off into any number of anxiety disorders. We'll discuss these disorders at length in the next section [3].
- **Suicide** – By some reports [8], 70% or more of suicide victims suffered from an anxiety disorder. The prevalence of suicide in anxious people should not be sugarcoated and cannot be overstated. Fortunately, suicide is always preventable [9] and anxiety can be properly treated before such drastic actions need be taken.

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Links

[1] <https://www.mentalhelp.net/articles/the-long-term-consequences-of-negative-stress/>

[2] http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/anxiety_and_physical_illness

[3] <https://explorable.com/common-anxiety-disorders>

[4] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-mindful-self-express/201303/why-we-cant-just-get-rid-of-anxiety-distress>

[5] <https://explorable.com/social-support>

[6] <https://www.mentalhelp.net/articles/self-efficacy-and-the-perception-of-control-in-stress-reduction/>

[7] <https://explorable.com/phobias-test-anxiety>

[8] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2940247/>

[9] <http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/suicide>