

## FURTHER INFORMATION?

For further information about stress, anxiety, depression, or any mental health issue, contact:

- ▶ A medical practitioner.
- ▶ Your local community health centre.
- ▶ Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria)  
270 Church Street, Richmond VIC 3121  
Tel: (03) 9427 0406 Fax: (03) 9427 1294  
Email: mhfvic@pacific.net.au www.mentalhealthvic.org.au
- ▶ Mental Health Foundation of Australia  
270 Church Street, Richmond VIC 3121  
Tel: (03) 9427 0407 Fax: (03) 9427 1294  
Email: mentalh@mira.net www.mhfa.org.au
- ▶ ARAFEMI (Association of Relatives and Friends of the Emotionally and Mentally Ill)  
Suite 1, 1091 Toorak Road, Camberwell VIC 3124  
Tel: (03) 9889 3733 Fax: (03) 9889 2878  
Telephone Support: (03) 9889 1777
- ▶ Anxiety Recovery Centre  
600 Orrong Road, Armadale VIC 3143  
Tel: (03) 9576 2311 Fax: (03) 9576 2499
- ▶ Department of Human Services website lists Community Mental Health Services in each region.  
www.dhs.vic.gov.au

### *Publications available for purchase:*

*(GST included)*

- Understanding Depression \$22.00
- Your Guide to Understanding and Managing Stress \$22.00
- Adolescent Health and Wellbeing: A Guide to Effective Coping \$22.00
- Your Guide to Responsible Gambling \$22.00
- Healthy Relationships: Healthy Schools \$22.00
- Postpartum Psychological Disorders \$22.00
- 'Why Me?' Video - Stress/Anxiety/Depression \$25.00

## THE OPTIONS PROJECT

The Options Project is a community mental health research, education, and promotion campaign, working to promote mental health in the community. The Project has produced a range of educational and health promotion materials.

### Project Management:

Chairman: Graham Burrows AO, KSJ, MD  
Deputy: Felicity Hempel QC  
Members: Megan McQueenie  
Sarah Porritt, Liberty Victoria  
Director: Barry Evans PhD

### Office:

Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria)  
270 Church Street Richmond VIC 3121  
Tel: (03) 9427 0406  
Fax: (03) 9427 1294  
Email: mhfvic@pacific.net.au  
www.mentalhealthvic.org.au

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# The Anxiety Disorders

Causes and Treatment



An information brochure produced by  
The Options Project  
Mental Health Foundation of Australia  
270 Church Street Richmond VIC 3121

## WHAT ARE THE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

The term “anxiety disorders” describes a number of specific conditions, each of which is characterised by high levels of arousal, discomfort, and the fear of sudden, uncontrollable panic attacks. An anxiety, but more a continual and often irrational feeling of discomfort and tension, usually without any justifiable cause.

Anxiety disorders take a variety of forms. Generalised Anxiety Disorder is characterised by excessive anxiety and apprehensive expectations about forthcoming events. A person suffering from Agoraphobia feels anxious about being in places or situations from which escape may be difficult or in which help is not available should the person suffer a panic attack. A person suffering from a Specific Phobia is characterised by a marked and persistent fear of specific objects or situations. People suffering from Social Phobia feel anxious when they have to confront situations where they may be under the scrutiny of others. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is characterised by recurrent obsessions or compulsions on the part of the sufferer, who feels anxious if they try to resist their obsessive thought or behaviours.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder are also considered a type of anxiety disorder, given that their predominant symptom is a pervasive anxiety about the traumatic event the person has experienced and anxiety about the possibility of the event re-occurring. As you can see, there are a range of so called disorders, but each has the defining characteristic of pervasive, unreasonable fear about general or specific events.

## WHAT CAUSES THE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Although anxiety disorders are one of the most common psychiatric diagnoses in the community (with an incident of around 1 in 10 people), the many factors which contribute to them make it often difficult to determine the exact cause. Physical and biochemical causes may play a part in the onset of at least some anxiety disorders(e.g. Panic Disorder with/without Agoraphobia; Specific Phobia; and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). Equally important may be the person's general level of anxiety and the beliefs and attitudes the person may hold about themselves and how the world should be. In each case, the individual needs to discuss their situation with their medical practitioner or counsellor to work out the most effective treatment plan.

## PANIC ATTACKS

The defining characteristic of anxiety disorders are panic attacks -- sudden feelings of intense terror which may occur in certain situations or for no apparent reason. Symptoms include shortness of breath, dizziness, rapid heartbeat, choking and nausea. The person may feel they are going to die.

The exact cause of panic attacks is not known but they are most likely a chemical response in the brain to stressful events or thinking about stressful or threatening events. It is now believed that changes in the neurochemical serotonin may contribute to the onset of panic attacks. Low levels of this chemical in the brain is also linked to depression.

## TREATMENTS FOR ANXIETY

In every case, there is a need for careful medical and psychological assessment, as people feel their anxiety in a variety of ways and its effects will also vary from person to person.

The most appropriate treatment approach for anxiety may consist of a variety of interventions, including: specific drug therapy; education; and psychological therapy.

People suffering from panic attacks as part of an anxiety disorder may be helped with tranquillisers (especially benzodiazepines) or anti-depressants. These are usually only prescribed in specific cases, to control such unpleasant side effects of anxiety as panic attacks or high levels of anxiety or arousal.

There are a range of psychological therapies for anxiety, aimed at helping the person control their arousal levels and manage their panic attacks. Education and counselling are useful in helping the person understand the nature of their condition and to be assured they are not “going mad.” Counselling can also assist the person stop drug/alcohol use, resolve life stresses, and overall, develop better coping skills. Education and counselling help the person reduce stress, resolve conflicts, manage their life more effectively, develop new ways of thinking about themselves and the world, and develop new ways of enjoying activities.

Part of treatment may involve helping the person avoid family conflicts and develop ways of using their family as a means of support and encouragement.