

Anxiety: What's Normal and When Is It a Problem?

By: Autumn Schulze, MA, LMFT

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time - in new social situations or before some type of performance-based activity, like doing a presentation at work. But, how do you know when normal anxiety becomes problem anxiety, and it's time to seek professional help?

Anxiety ranges along a continuum, from mild to severe. Normal, healthy anxiety involves worry and feelings of anxiousness felt in response to everyday life stressors. Healthy anxiety helps us by giving us the motivation to do what needs to be done and helps protect us from danger. You don't want to take work home over the weekend, but anxiety about your boss' reaction on Monday morning motivates you to do it anyway. You don't want to take the time to see the doctor about that lump on your back, but anxiety about the possibility of serious illness motivates you to call for an appointment. These anxious feelings, though uncomfortable, are generally experienced at an intensity level proportionate to the stressor that triggered them, and they fade away when the stressor is eliminated.

People don't always experience anxiety in the same way or feel it in the same parts of their bodies. Some of the ways people experience anxiety include:

- Muscle tension (ex: stiff, sore head, neck, shoulders, and back)
- Headache
- Feeling nervous or "keyed up"
- Feeling tense, irritable, or "on edge"
- Small, repetitive movements (ex: moving your feet and legs)
- Tensing muscles and holding them tensed (ex: jaw clenching, tooth grinding)
- Shortness of breath
- Increased heart rate
- Hot flashes or chills
- Shaking or trembling
- Nausea (and other forms of gastrointestinal distress)
- Tingling sensations
- Feeling a general sense of dread
- Feeling fearful of bad things happening in the future
- Numbness
- Sweating
- Dizziness
- Feeling detached from reality
- Feeling detached from your body
- Chest pain
- Heart palpitations
- Feeling like you're choking
- Feeling afraid you're having a heart attack or dying

- Feeling afraid you're going crazy or losing control

As we move from the top of the list to the bottom, the symptoms become more and more intense and unpleasant. When people's anxiety manifests in these more severe forms, it often starts interfering their ability to function in daily life. When anxiety prevents people from doing the things they want and need to do in life, that's when it's time for them to seek professional help.

Contrary to popular belief, anxiety disorders are very common.

- Most common mental health problem among American women
- Second most common mental health problem among American men
- Approximately 15% of the U.S. population, or 40 million adults, suffer with an anxiety disorder
- Nearly a quarter of the adult population will suffer from an anxiety disorder during their lifetime

When anxiety exceeds the normal range, it can manifest as a number of anxiety disorders:

- Generalized anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Specific phobias
- Social anxiety/ Agoraphobia
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Much of this information comes from "The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook" by Edmund J. Bourne, Ph.D. This workbook is an excellent resource for anyone experiencing significant anxiety.

Autumn Schulze, MA, LMFT is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Indianapolis, IN. She has specialized training in Emotion-Focused Therapy for couples and has extensive experience working with children and families. Her passion is to help distressed individuals and couples find the emotional and relational healing God intends for them. Her desire is to see more and more households restored to health and happiness. Contact [Autumn Schulze](#) to discuss your situation with her.