

Fears and Anxiety

What is the issue?

Anxiety is a normal part of life for children, adolescents and adults. This is usually a temporary response to stress. However, when anxiety persists it may be necessary to obtain assistance. Untreated anxiety that lasts for a longer period of time may make it difficult for a child to participate in normal activities and enjoy life.

Young people may misuse alcohol or other drugs in an attempt to decrease their anxiety. Some may become depressed and some may be at risk of suicide.

There are several different kinds of anxiety that children and adolescents experience which may become more serious and require specialised help.

(For further information please see the Fact Sheet on Post Traumatic Stress)

What are the signs of anxiety

A child or adolescent with anxiety may show some of the following signs:

- Constant thoughts and fears about the safety of self and parents.
- Refusing to go to school.
- Frequent stomach aches and other physical complaints.
- Becoming upset or worried about sleeping away from home.
- Becoming panicky or having tantrums when separated from parents.
- Finding it difficult to meet or talk to new people.
- Withdrawing from situations that will involve meeting new people.
- Worrying excessively about things before they happen.
- Worrying excessively about school, friends, sport.
- Needing a lot of reassurance to try anything new.
- Being preoccupied with cleanliness and hand washing.
- Finding it difficult to relax or go to sleep.

Anxiety is not always linked to a specific event or source.

Separation Anxiety

Children often experience anxiety over separation from familiar people and situations. This anxiety is normal in babies but should lessen as the child grows up. Excessive anxiety on routine separations may indicate a problem.

Signs of separation anxiety include unrealistic worry about harm occurring to family members, the fear they will not return home, a reluctance to sleep alone, refusal to attend school and physical symptoms such as stomach pains or headache.

Generalised anxiety disorder

Occurs when a child or adolescent has excessive or unrealistic worry which may not be linked to a specific event or source of fear. Children and adolescents with this disorder may be perfectionists who may spend hours redoing tasks.

Anxiety and the body

Children and adolescents may have a number of physical symptoms as a result of their anxiety such as:

- Restlessness.
- Sweating or clamminess.
- Stomach "butterflies".
- Muscle tension.
- Difficulty sleeping.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) usually begins in childhood or adolescence. The main features are recurrent obsessions and/or compulsions. Obsessions are repeated unwanted thoughts that cause marked anxiety. Compulsions are repetitive behaviours (like hand washing) or mental acts such as counting or silently repeating words. They are often intense enough to cause discomfort and interfere with a child's normal routine, schooling and social activities.

Young children may fear harm will occur to them or a family member. Older children or adolescents may fear germs or illness. They may fear bad things will happen if they stop these repetitive behaviours or thoughts. Children and adolescents are often ashamed or embarrassed about their OCD. They may fear they are going crazy and try to keep what they are experiencing a secret from family and friends. Medications, in addition to other therapies, may be helpful for this condition.

Panic Disorder

Children and adolescents with panic disorder have unexpected and repeated periods of intense fear together with a racing heartbeat, shortness of breath or dizziness. These "attacks" may last minutes to hours and frequently happen without warning. Some children and adolescents may begin avoiding any situation where they fear a panic attack may happen. They may become reluctant to attend school or be separated

from their parents.

With effective intervention, children and adolescents may learn to control anxiety and panic attacks. Early treatment of anxiety can prevent the development of complications such as agoraphobia (fear of situations that might cause anxiety), depression and misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

How to get help for anxiety problems

- Your **general practitioner**
- Your local **Area Health Service** (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services
- Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists may also be able to provide help.

If you would like more information about mental health and services contact:

NSW Association for Mental Health, Mental Health Information Service
Monday to Friday, 12.30pm - 4.30pm
Phone: (02) 9816 5688 Rural areas: 1800 674 200

When young people refuse to leave their home or go to school this is a common signal they need help.

All children and adolescents will experience some anxiety at different stages of their development. For instance children often have a number of short lived fears such as fear of the dark, storms, animals or strangers.

However, when anxieties become severe and begin to interfere with normal activities such as making friends, attending school or being separated from parents, specialist assistance may be needed.

Learning to recognise and control symptoms is the key to managing anxiety. Early treatment may prevent future problems and difficulties. Your doctor should rule out any physical cause for the symptoms. Stress management and relaxation exercises may assist in controlling symptoms. Mental health professionals can advise you and your child about treatment options.