

# Disability Insight

Take a look around you

**Mental Health Awareness Day - Anxiety**

**6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2020**

## **Key points**

- Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric disorders.
- It is estimated that about 25 per cent of adults will suffer an anxiety disorder at some point in their life.
- Anxiety is the main symptom of several conditions, including panic disorder, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder and social anxiety disorder (social phobia).
- A single test can't diagnose anxiety. Instead, an anxiety diagnosis requires a lengthy process of physical examinations, mental health evaluations, and psychological questionnaires.
- Several anxiety tests and scales are also used to help your doctor assess the level of anxiety you're experiencing.

## **1 About Anxiety**

Anxiety is a normal, if unpleasant, experience that can affect us all in different ways and at different times. Whereas stress is something that will come and go as a result of the external factor causing it (be it a work, relationship or money problems, etc.), anxiety is something that can persist whether or not the cause is clear. Some people, but not all, will have a very identifiable cause for their anxiety; a traumatic incident, lots of stressors or have undergone a significant life event (moving house, getting divorced, having surgery).

Physical symptoms of Anxiety can include:

- a pounding heartbeat
- breathing faster
- palpitations (an irregular heartbeat)
- feeling sick
- chest pains
- headaches

- sweating
- loss of appetite
- feeling faint
- needing the toilet more often
- 'butterflies' in your tummy

Psychological symptoms can include:

- feeling worried or uneasy a lot of the time
- having difficulty sleeping, leading to tiredness and a lack of energy
- poor concentration
- being irritable
- being extra alert
- feeling on edge or not being able to relax
- needing frequent reassurance from other people
- feeling tearful

## What Treatments are Available for Anxiety?

**Talking treatments** - There are two types of therapies recommended for anxiety and panic: **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** – this focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behaviour, and teaches you coping skills for managing anxiety. **Applied relaxation therapy** – this involves learning how to relax your muscles in situations where you normally experience anxiety.

**Medication** - Your doctor might offer to prescribe you medication to help manage some symptoms. There are different types of medications used to treat anxiety, these include antidepressants, pregablin and beta-blockers. Your doctor will be able to discuss these with you and make an appropriate recommendation based on your presenting symptoms. Some people find it helpful to try therapy and medication at the same time, but medication shouldn't be the only thing you're offered.

## 2 How does Anxiety affect someone's life?

Although anxiety can be a normal part of life, it can become a mental health problem if it impacts on your ability to live your life as fully as you want to. For example, it may be a problem for you if:

- your feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time
- your fears or worries are out of proportion to the situation
- you avoid situations that might cause you to feel anxious
- your worries are experienced as very distressing or are hard to control
- you regularly experience symptoms of anxiety, which could include panic attacks

- you find it hard to go about your everyday life or do things you enjoy.

If your symptoms fit a particular set of defined criteria then you might be diagnosed with a particular anxiety disorder. But it's also possible to experience problems with anxiety without having a specific diagnosis.

Please click on the link below to read an article and watch a short film which portrays some of the difficulties of living with mental health issues.

<https://www.amh.org.uk/news/one-thing-for-action-mental-health/>

### **Supporting someone with Anxiety in work**

There are a number of behaviors that can indicate an employee has anxiety. Identifying these early will allow you to have a conversation and help the employee feel supported. Things to watch out for include: Increased sick leave; Drop in performance; Struggling to make decisions; Changes in eating habits; Excessive smoking/drinking.

### **Some practical ways to support the employee are to:**

**Adopt an open-door policy** - this helps to create a friendly, welcoming and communicative culture. This is especially beneficial for an employee with anxiety as it will help put their mind at ease and will let them know that support is there any time, whenever they may need it. If your employees are openly sharing their worries or stresses instead of keeping them bottled up, they're much less likely to become overwhelmed.

**Reasonable Adjustments** - be as flexible as possible to aid recovery. Even small adjustments can make a difference. For example, changing working hours temporarily or providing the option to work from home. You should also accommodate for any counselling sessions they may be attending such as through Inspire.

**Have a conversation** - put some time aside to have a chat in a private space to try and understand more. Try to get an idea of what triggers their anxiety and what kind of support they might need. Reassure them that you're there to help and support them. This initial conversation will give you the means to create an action plan together and decide what the best step forward might be. Book in regular one to ones and check in on their progress.

**Get trained up** - look into mental health training for your both you and your management team. This training will provide you with the tools you need to tackle stigma in the workplace and educate you about mental health.

For an article on anxiety in the workplace please follow the link below:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/your-stories/my-anxiety-depression-at-work/#.XiWzbmY3aUk>

#### **4 Support for you if you care for somebody with Anxiety**

It can be really difficult when someone you care about is experiencing anxiety, but there are things you can do to help. Try not to put pressure on your loved one to do more than they feel comfortable with. It's really important to be patient, listen to their wishes and take things at a pace that feels right for them. It's understandable to want to help them face their fears or find practical solutions, but it can be very distressing for someone to feel they're being forced into situations before they feel ready. This could even make their anxiety worse. Ask how you can help, they may already know how you can support them – for example, it might help to take them out of the situation, talk to them calmly or do breathing exercises with them. If you think your friend or family member's anxiety is becoming a problem for them, you could encourage them to seek appropriate treatment by talking to a GP or therapist.

#### **5 Support for you if you have Anxiety**

In terms of how you can help yourself if you have anxiety you could: Talk to someone you trust, try to manage your worries, look after your physical health, try breathing exercises, keep a diary, try peer support or complementary and alternative therapies.

##### **Sources of support:**

Inspire offer an employee counselling service which includes:

Freephone 24 hour immediate telephone support

Structured telephone counselling

Structured face to face counselling available across Ireland

Financial & Legal guidance on issues causing stress and anxiety

Retirement planning service

Return-to-work Support

<https://www.inspirewellbeing.org/mentalhealth>

##### **Sources and further reading:**

<https://www.amh.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Briefing-Mental-Health-Crisis-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/#.XiWmeWY3aUk>

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/get-help/anxiety-information/>

