11 Signs You May Have an Anxiety Disorder

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A Guide to Anxiety Symptoms

The symptoms of anxiety can vary from person to person, but there are a handful that are common among many anxiety warriors. Although it is normal for everyone to experience anxiety at some point in their lives, if your symptoms are persistent and unrelenting, you may have an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety is a natural reaction to stress, but when your anxiousness begins to affect your performance at work, school, or in relationships, it becomes an issue. The symptoms of anxiety can be separated into four distinct categories: physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive.

Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

Many of the physical symptoms of anxiety are so common that these physical symptoms often precede an actual diagnosis.

There are a number of physical symptoms associated with anxiety, which vary from person to person. The three listed here are very common across a number of anxiety disorders.

Heart Palpitations

An increased heart rate or a rapid, irregular heartbeat is an extremely common symptom of anxiety.

Although common, many people fear that a racing heart is a sign of a heart attack. This is why this symptom also leads many people to the emergency room.

Sensing that there is something wrong with your heart can also make anxiety worse, causing more symptoms to develop. If you do begin to feel heart palpitations that you suspect are as a result of anxiety, it is best to start working on calming techniques until you are settled again.

Throughout your experience with anxiety, take note of your common symptoms. It can ease your mind to know that what you're feeling is normal.

Shortness of Breath

Whether you're hyperventilating or feeling tightness in your chest and throat, making it difficult to breathe, there are many people who associate shortness of breath with anxiety.

What makes this symptom scary for many individuals is the inability to catch your breath, despite your lack of physical activity. You can predict that you'll begin to breathe harder when running, but if you develop the same sensation while sitting on the couch, this symptom can be troubling.

Excessive Sweating

Do you notice that your internal body temperature rises if you get scared? Being in a constant state of worry can cause similar side effects.

Many people who have anxiety disorders experience excessive sweating, resulting from their feelings of panic. Stress will, unfortunately, cause most people to sweat.

If you have difficulty controlling your feelings of worry, you may also notice an inability to prevent stress sweat. Unfortunately, excessive sweating may lead to embarrassment, causing more unwanted feelings of stress and shame.

Emotional Symptoms of Anxiety

The emotional symptoms of anxiety are some of the more widely recognizable symptoms of the disorder. Most anxious individuals experience the symptoms below.

Stress and Worry

Feelings of constant worry and stress are so synonymous with anxiety that some use these terms interchangeably. Although everyone experiences periods of stress in the course of their lives, those with anxiety disorders deal with it on a near-constant basis.

Anxiety is often defined by persistent and excessive worry about even ordinary issues, which is often out of proportion to the actual circumstance.

Panic and Panic Attacks

Panic may be a symptom of anxiety in itself or may be experienced in the form of a panic attack. Feelings of panic are challenging to control and are often disproportionate to any present danger.

Certain phobias or triggers can quickly induce panic or panic attacks – defined by sudden feelings of intense fear or terror that reach a peak within minutes – making it hard to prevent.

Due to how unpleasant these feelings can be, many individuals will isolate themselves from the triggers that induce panic.

Next page: The behavioral and cognitive symptoms of anxiety, and tips for coping with anxiety symptoms.

Behavioral Symptoms of Anxiety

Consistent feelings of stress take a toll on your mind and your body. As a result, many individuals with anxiety experience behavioral changes as a result of their disorders.

Nervous Habits

In order to deal with feelings of fear and panic, it is normal for your body to enter into a “fight-or-flight” response to danger. In preparation, your body is flooded with the adrenaline necessary to either fight or run away.

The issue is, when there is no real danger to escape, your body can’t use up this adrenaline. Many people with anxiety will develop nervous habits, as a result.

Nervous habits such as tapping your foot, grinding your teeth, or drumming your fingers across a flat surface may be a symptom of your anxiety. Over a period of time, these movements will begin to eat away at the rush of

adrenaline and expend your energy.

Compulsions

Although Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or OCD, is commonly associated with compulsions, individuals with many different forms of anxiety can experience them.

Whether it be the paranoid double-checking of the locks on your windows and doors, or the overwhelming need to clean every inch of your home, anxiety often involves compulsions at some level.

In the short-term, it might feel like you are helping yourself cope with anxiety by following these compulsions, but in reality, your anxiety may be controlling your actions.

Cognitive Symptoms of Anxiety

These symptoms will interfere with your ability to carry on the actions of your daily life, as cognitive symptoms make it difficult to think beyond the trappings of anxiety.

Racing Thoughts

Many anxious individuals feel as though they are in a near-constant state of worry. In order for worry to be this persistent, it often involves racing thoughts.

Anxiety can make you worry about absolutely everything, creating a continuous list of “What if” situations in your head. One stressor often leads to another, with no solution in sight.

With these panicked thoughts of the future racing through your head, it can be nearly impossible to focus on anything else.

Obsessions

Anxiety disorders can lead many people to obsess over a particular thought or situation, escalating the worry that they are already experiencing with regards to that issue.

It’s likely that obsessing over it will make it seem worse than it actually is, which is how it can be so easy for those with anxiety to stress over issues that others might feel are insignificant.

Tips for Coping With Anxiety Symptoms

No matter what applies to you from the list above, there are plenty of ways that you can manage or cope with your anxiety symptoms.

Get to Know Your Experience

The first step in managing these symptoms is simply to recognize when they appear. Once you become better able to acknowledge their presence, you will be able to control their hold over you.

As you begin to understand the symptoms that are correlated with your experience of anxiety, you’ll be assured that what your feeling is normal.

Acknowledging that heart palpitations are a common physical symptom of your anxiety, for example, may ease that symptom, as you no longer need to jump to the conclusion that you’re having a heart attack.

Avoid Your Triggers

If you know that certain people, events or experiences may trigger your anxiety, do your best to avoid them. By doing so, you are managing your symptoms by minimizing their appearance.

Although it's important to limit your anxiety triggers, remember to be reasonable. If you have social anxiety, it is not healthy to completely cut yourself off from the outside world and stay inside your apartment.

On the other hand, a loud and crowded rock concert is not an ideal situation as someone with social anxiety. Keep your expectations reasonable and be gentle with yourself.

Be brave, but don't overdo it. Small wins are still wins, so stay positive!

Next page: More tips for coping with anxiety symptoms.

Physical Exercise

You've probably heard it from everyone you know, but regular exercise is an effective method of controlling your anxiety.

It's believed that physical activity allows your body to practice responding to stress. This way, when difficulties arise, you are better able to respond.

There is no denying the positive feelings that are associated with exercise either. Often referred to as a "runner's high," many people report feeling happier and calmer post-workout.

When it comes to exercise for mental health, just about anything will do. Most adults should aim for at least two and a half hours of moderate physical activity per week.

In order to succeed, you have to work physical activity into your routine and make it a priority. If you don't, it can become too easy to stop suddenly.

If the thought of hitting the gym makes you groan, research clubs or sports teams in your area instead. The comradery that many people feel when they belong to a club or a team can make the whole experience more than just exercise for you.

Partaking in a new sport or activity can help you work towards a goal, while your teammates can help keep you accountable by noticing when you decide not to show up.

Exercise doesn't have to be a chore. Take the time to find something that you enjoy doing to ensure that you keep going!

Remember to Breathe

If you begin to experience symptoms of anxiety, despite your attempts to minimize them, don't panic. Recognize those symptoms and remember to breathe.

Diaphragmatic breathing, or deep breathing, has been proven to be a successful method of dissipating those feelings of anxiety as they arise. There are many different ways to breathe deeply, but keep it simple to start.

Try breathing in through your nose for four counts, hold your breath for a count of four, and then control your breath out to a count of six. If any of the above is particularly difficult, alter the pattern to better suit you.

Pacing your breathing can help you regain control of your body as those symptoms of anxiety begin to arise. If you can breathe out for longer than your breath in, you will begin to slow your heart rate and relax your muscles.

Focusing on counting your breaths will also distract you from whatever it is that's triggering your anxiety. Continue with the breath pattern that suits you until you feel your symptoms begin to dissipate.

Deep breathing can also be the first step in exploring meditation techniques, which many individuals use to control their anxiety and stay in the present moment.

Explore Meditation

Building off of deep breathing techniques, meditation can be an effective long-term method of managing anxiety. Meditation is all about remaining within the present moment, rather than allowing the mind to wander between the past and the future.

When we are too focused on the future at what might happen, we become anxious. For most people, this is an issue because it is a persistent worry that we can do little to change.

As we cannot predict or change the future before it happens, it is best to learn to appreciate and live in the present moment. It is here that we have control and can make decisions.

The easiest way to begin practicing meditation is to focus on the breath as it enters and exits your body. You will begin to learn to pay attention to how your body feels and reacts to your breath, remaining in the present by examining what is happening within yourself.

Many websites and apps support the practice of meditation and can get you started on your journey. It can be challenging to meditate, especially the first few times you attempt it.

Guided meditations are a great resource for beginners, as you will be given gentle instructions every step of the way. If you are lost or confused, your meditation teacher will help to guide you.

The best way to learn is to start off slow, meditating for no more than one minute, once or twice per day. Most people feel the most anxious first thing in the morning and right before they go to bed at night.

In order to make meditation part of your daily routine, find a time that works for you and meditate at that same time, every day. Remember to keep it short in the beginning, to ensure that each meditation experience is positive and successful.

As meditation becomes easier for you over time, you can challenge yourself with longer, non-guided meditations.

Join a Support Group

Do some research to discover the support groups that exist in your area. Many of these programs are tailored to specific disorders, so you can feel safe in a room full of your peers and supporters who understand what you're going through.

These groups are often free to join, as local mental health clinics create them and run by volunteers who have lived experience with anxiety disorders. These groups are an affordable alternative to expensive individual psychotherapy, which is often out of reach for many individuals with mental illness.

Support groups offer talk therapy in a social setting, allowing therapists and volunteers the chance to help multiple people at one time. You are also given the opportunity to develop new techniques to cope with your anxiety, as some groups explore cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT.

CBT is considered the most effective form of psychotherapy for anxiety disorders. It is designed to teach skills to improve symptoms of anxiety, before gradually returning to the activities that are being avoided due to anxiety.

It may feel uncomfortable and unnatural at first to openly discuss your struggles with anxiety to a room full of

strangers, so it might take some time before you begin to open up. This is perfectly normal, and no one should pressure you to participate.

Remember that you are surrounded by people who understand how you feel and are also going through similar situations in their own lives. Eventually, you may come to discover that there is more to learn than to fear.

Talk to Your Doctor

Whether the above techniques for controlling your symptoms have worked for you or not, keep your doctor informed. If at any point you feel like your anxiety is becoming too overwhelming, your doctor may suggest exploring the possibilities of anxiety medications.

If you feel that your anxiety is negatively impacting your work, relationships, or life in general, it is time to discuss all of your options with your doctor. There is no need for you to continue to suffer when there are alternate solutions to try.

Depending on your anxiety disorder, your doctor may prescribe anti-depressants, beta blockers, or both. There are many anti-depressants, known as serotonin reuptake inhibitors (or SSRIs), that work to restore the balance of chemicals in the brain.

For more short-term use, some anti-depressants and beta blockers are designed to act quickly, relieving the symptoms of an anxiety attack or a similar episode. These are only used when required to calm you down immediately, so that you may regain control of your symptoms.

By keeping the lines of communication open between you and your doctor, together, you will be able to explore what does and does not work when it comes to managing your anxiety. If there are any symptoms that are particularly difficult for you, a doctor may be able to shed some light on how to mitigate that issue and control your anxiety.