

# Anxiety

Anxiety is very useful part of who we are as people. Without anxiety, college students wouldn't study for their tests (Why would you? There's nothing to worry about. You'll do fine!), talk to their parents anymore, drink in moderation or even be able to safely cross the street.

Anxiety, at its core, helps us set limits on our behavior. Without this limit setting anxiety, people would say and do whatever they want. And while you think that might sound good, remember, it's not just you that is able to say or do whatever you want, but everyone. Imagine what it would be like if there were no limits on behavior on a college campus. Students bring their family pets (sounds good until you have 20 dogs living on dorm floor), no one bothers to put away their tray at the dining hall creating a huge mess, students talk in class without worry about how their professor sees their behavior. It's chaos.

Anxiety also provides some important safety limits to our behavior. It keeps you wearing coats in the winter to keep from freezing to death, washing your hands to protect from germs, not punching the mixed-martial arts fighter who cut in front of you in line at the dining hall. Anxiety is a safety mechanism hard-wired into our brains.

Anxiety becomes problematic when it expands beyond the normal range. Students who experience anxiety disorders may become anxious about a classroom presentation the same way others normally would become anxious if a tiger ran across campus. Imagine the panic, sweating, tunnel vision, difficulty breathing and feeling of impending dread. Fight or Flight!

This level of reaction over a class presentation is out of step with the perceived threat. It is exactly appropriate given a tiger on campus. The problem then becomes one of understanding why some students become so anxious and experience panic attacks at the thought of class presentations, at the prospect of asking someone out or worrying about getting a perfect 4.0 GPA when a 3.3 GPA would suffice.

Anxiety can occur as a result of early trauma or early expectations about behavior. The anxious reaction (panic attack, continuous worry, paranoia) becomes linked to an idea or event that doesn't need that kind of reaction. Perhaps there was a physical beating that came with talking out of turn when a student was growing up as a young child. This then becomes a connection they bring to college with them.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is thought to work this way. Imagine a non-traditional college student returns from a deployment in Iraq. They have been conditioned to drop to the ground in the event of a loud noise which is associated with small arms fire or a roadside Improvised Explosive Device (IED). This was a needed reaction for survival when the soldier was deployed. It is no longer needed in a college environment when a professor drops a book, a roommate turns up the bass or a car backfires.

Another school of thought regarding anxiety is that some people are just wired differently. Regardless of how someone was raised, some people are just more prone to worry about things around them out of step with everyone else. In extreme circumstances, this hard-wired neurological problem can be form a mental illness such as schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder. Here the anxiety shows up as paranoia that keeps the student worried and overwhelmed, frightened at every possibility of life threatening attack.

There is some good news regarding anxiety, whether it is related to a mental illness, learned environmental behavior or a more subtle worry about tests, performance anxiety or talking to people. Anxiety and panic attacks are very treatable with talk-therapy and/or medications. Students who come into therapy for anxiety related disorders typically see an immediate reduction in their symptoms.

## So, what to do?

- Anxiety diagnosis and help often requires a visit to your campus psychologist or counselor. As you can imagine, this is difficult since the student who needs to come into therapy is already very anxious. The added thought of coming into a therapy office, filling out paperwork and telling their story to a stranger often prevents students from seeking help for their problems. This is sad, as many who come into therapy for anxiety feel better almost immediately after their first session.
- Anxiety disorders respond very well to medication. The medications can either be a short-acting calming agent (e.g. Ativan, Xanax...) to address panic attack symptoms or a longer-acting medication (e.g., Zoflot, Paxil...) to address more long-term worry. While the short-acting medications work wonders in reducing panic, it important to remember the Goldilocks' principal. Don't use too much (this medication can be addicting when used over several months) and don't use too little (some students won't use any out of fear of addiction). It is important to use the short-acting medication somewhere in the middle---just right. The longer-acting medication takes a bit longer to reach a full effect, requiring students who start on the medication to be patient for several weeks as they reach a therapeutic level.
- There are a number of self-help books and websites that share some useful information related to anxiety. Most advice can be summarized below:
  - Build strength to strength. Many times, when a student is anxious they set up a black/white, right/wrong scenario in their head. This actually keeps the student from being successful in changing their behavior. Say the goal is to talk to the professor about a late paper or obtain permission to replace an oral presentation with a paper instead. The student never talks to the professor (they are too anxious) and ends up sending an email to ask the professor her question. The student then beats herself up for not being able to talk face-face to the professor and skips the next two classes. This all-or-nothing thinking can be common with those who struggle with anxiety and prevent them from lasting change.
  - Control your inner dialogue. Many of those who suffer from anxiety give themselves ongoing negative messages like "you can't do this", "You'll fail again like you do every-time", "What's the point of even trying?" which end up becoming self-fulfilling prophesies. While it might seem silly at first, changing these messages by writing post-it notes with positive messages or starting the day with a few positive affirmations is a way to begin to change the anxiety behavior.
  - Develop a realistic view of failure. Often the expectation of perfectionism is the gas that fuels the car of anxiety. Students should realize what is realistic in terms of expectations (hey, even J.K. Rowling had the Harry Potter manuscript rejected 14 times before it was picked up by a publisher). It is also important for students to learn to live a life in balance. While a 4.0 GPA is a wonderful thing, more often than not, a 3.5 GPA and occasional social life is much better for the overall mental health.
  - Watch for triggers. Be aware of circumstances that have caused problems in the past (e.g., long car rides with someone else driving, not knowing what to say when put on the spot in a social situation, too many assignments due all at once). When you can understand the circumstances that trigger your anxiety, you can then take the first steps towards better preparing yourself prior to the stressful experience. Perhaps you bring music to distract yourself in the car, have a set of three interesting questions you can ask new people or develop a plan to organize and handle assignments when they all come in at once.

## Social Anxiety

The word “phobia” is used to describe a condition in which someone has an excessive or unreasonable fear reaction to a specific situation or thing. There are three types of phobias: agoraphobia (fear of places or situations from which escape may be difficult), specific phobia (fear of a specific object or situation), and social anxiety disorder (fear of social and/or performance situations). Social anxiety disorder is the third most common psychiatric disorder in the United States. This means that 1 out of 8 Americans suffer from social anxiety disorder. The good news is that it is treatable. Many people recover and go on to live healthy, happy and productive lives without the fear which previously consumed their lives.

To the person with social anxiety disorder, going to a job interview can be torture. Going to get-togethers, parties, conferences, class, even the grocery store are threatening and scary. Few people have heard of this problem, and rarely hear it discussed on any media. Therefore, they keep quiet about it. They feel like they are “abnormal” or “weird” They may even feel that they are “crazy” or that they will end up labeled “crazy.” They are not crazy, weird, or abnormal. In fact almost everyone experiences some social anxiety now and then; it’s normal. However, social anxiety disorder limit’s the lifestyle of those with the illness.

### ***What are the signs and symptoms of social anxiety disorder?***

- You have an extreme fear of a situation in which you have to meet new people.
- The feared social situations are experienced with intense anxiety.
- You may entirely avoid social situations.
- The anxiety-provoking social situation causes physical symptoms which may include: sweating, shaking, increased heart beat, increased blood pressure, headache, muscle tension, trembling or numbness, change in rate and tone of speech, dry mouth or blushing.
- You are very anxious in the presence of others.
- You may feel as if everyone is looking at you or judging you.
- You may understand that your fears are illogical, but you continue to fear the social interaction.

### ***Will I ever feel comfortable in a social situation?***

Yes. Most likely, with treatment, your social anxiety will decrease. You will be able to do the things you want to do, and the things you enjoy with less anxiety. It is a gradual process, so be patient. What professionals believe to be the best treatment is a therapeutic model called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT often produces long-lasting, permanent relief from the anxiety that grips your life. To overcome social anxiety disorder, individual therapy and group therapy is recommended. Some individuals may respond most effectively to short-term therapy, while others may respond to long-term therapy. However, completion of a behavioral therapy model is essential to increase the likelihood that you will find relief from your symptoms. Some individuals find relief through another type of therapy called Social Skill Training. It is a component of “talk” therapy. Meeting with a professional therapist, you discuss and rehearse problematic social situations. Clients are shown how to make eye contact, greet people, talk louder, and ask questions, along with many other skills. Clients monitor themselves with thought records or other forms of writing things down. They practice their new skills with the therapist and then in real life. Hopefully, the practice the client has had in session will generalize to the client’s personal social environment.

### ***THERE IS A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL PEOPLE WITH SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER!***

However, without treatment your social anxiety will continue to encumber your lifestyle. Current research is clear that CBT is highly successful in the treatment of social anxiety disorder. You must be persistent and active in your therapy and stick with the methods, techniques and skills you acquire through therapy. If you are motivated, you will succeed, you will come out healthier and happier on the other side. Your situation is very hopeful.