

# Your body's response to stress affects your health

**Everyone gets anxious from time to time – it's a normal response to stressful situations like having a job interview. This kind of anxiety is just a normal part of life. But for some people, the feelings of anxiety can be a lot more extreme and become what's known as an anxiety disorder.**

Anxiety disorders are even more common than depression. One in four New Zealanders will experience some kind of anxiety disorder during their lifetime.

## + what is the difference?

Anxiety is a normal and healthy response to a stressful or difficult event in your life. It usually lasts a few hours or a few days at most, and it doesn't affect your health or other parts of your life.

Too much anxiety, however, can be totally overwhelming.

Anxiety disorder is different because the feelings:

- Are quite intense.
- Last for weeks, months or more.
- Negatively affect your thoughts, behaviour, and general health.
- Leave you feeling distressed and not enjoying life.

It can impact on other areas of your life – like your ability to perform at work, or your relationships with friends and family.

People with anxiety disorders may also be depressed, and often become worried or upset about their problem, and may try to help themselves by drinking too much which makes it worse.

## If you want to talk to someone who can help:

Call the Depression Helpline on **0800 111 757**

Text The Lowdown team for free on **5626**

Or talk to your doctor

## + the warning signs

### Behaviours

- Avoiding socialising or going out.
- Finding ways to reduce anxiety (e.g having someone with you all the time).
- Avoiding eye contact with others.
- Using alcohol or drugs to calm down.

### Thoughts

- 'I'm going crazy'.
- 'I won't have anything interesting to say'.
- 'I can't control my worry'.
- 'I have a serious illness that the doctors can't detect'.
- 'What if germs get on my hands and I get sick?'.

### Feelings

Confused, anxious, tense all the time, constantly nervous, panicky, terrified, on edge.

### Physical

Blushing, trembling, heart racing, numbness, tingling, nausea, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, dizziness.

## + types of anxiety

There are a number of anxiety disorders, but the most common are:

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder** - where the person feels anxious about a number of things on most days over a long period of time – six months or more.
- **Phobias, including social phobia** – when a person feels very fearful about a particular object or situation and it interferes with life. Examples are fear of attending social events, driving over bridges, or travelling on planes.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** – this refers to experiencing ongoing intrusive thoughts and fears which cause anxiety (obsessions). These obsessions lead to the person carrying out behaviours or rituals (compulsions). An example is a fear of germs which leads to constant washing of hands or clothes.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** – this can occur any time after a person has experienced a traumatic event, such as an assault, or serious accident. The symptoms last for at least a month and include difficulty in relaxing, bad dreams or flashbacks of the incident, and the avoidance of anything related to the event.
- **Panic Disorder** – a person with panic disorder has panic attacks, which are intense feelings of anxiety and the kind of physical symptoms you would have if you were in great danger. During a panic attack, you can feel like you've lost control of your body and emotions. You may feel sick, dizzy and short of breath.

## + what you can do

Anxiety disorders can be managed and overcome with help. It's important to recognize and treat them as soon as possible. This can avoid a lifetime of battling with anxiety and maybe depression too. Some forms of talking therapy, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), are very effective for some people. For most people, talking therapy is the first choice in treating anxiety disorders, because it helps people change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations. This can also prevent further problems (See Fact Sheet 16). Learning relaxation techniques can be helpful.

**Most people need to seek professional help – either from a doctor, counsellor or psychologist to help decide which is the best way through for them.**

## + getting help

**If you want to talk to a trained counsellor about how you're feeling, or you've got any questions, you can:**

- **Call the Depression Helpline on 0800 111 757**
- **Text The Lowdown team for free on 5626**

They can listen to your story, and come up with ideas about what might help. They can also put you in touch with health professionals close to where you live, if that's what you want.

**Or for more information you can visit:**

**[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz) or [www.thelowdown.co.nz](http://www.thelowdown.co.nz)  
[www.nzgg.org.nz](http://www.nzgg.org.nz) – Consumer Resources**

The Ministry of Health would like to acknowledge information sourced from: NZ Mental Health Survey 2006, NZ Guidelines Group, Royal Australian and NZ College of Psychiatrists, MaGPIe Research Group, Beyond Blue (Australia).

For more information and fact sheets visit  
**[www.depression.org.nz](http://www.depression.org.nz)**

[newzealand.govt.nz](http://newzealand.govt.nz)