

HEAD STRONG

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW AS A YOUTH LEADER ANXIETY

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a vital emotion, warning us of possible future risks or problems. It keeps us from making bad decisions or judgements. However, it is also the emotion most commonly linked with emotional and mental health problems. Anxiety can flare up very quickly but understanding it better is often the key to overcoming problems. Think of it as a bit like a smoke alarm. It is the system your brain uses to warn you that something significant may be about to happen. But sometimes it becomes too sensitive and is triggered too often.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is part of the system of healthy emotions that are central to the way the brain keeps track of the world around us. No one is totally anxiety free, but it can become problematic when it is triggered too often, or is too strong. Some people are more prone to anxiety in the first place: highly driven people, or those who struggle with issues such as self confidence etc. Anxiety can also rise up very quickly in response to stress.

Sometimes anxiety can seem to come from nowhere - and in these situations understanding what is triggering it can be a key part of recovery. If you are struggling with anxiety, there may be specific triggers (for example in phobias) or a general heightened sense of feeling anxious. Some people feel they are never totally relaxed and may find it impossible to control their anxiety or worrying. Many suffer panic attacks: moments when anxiety triggers powerful physical symptoms such as sweating, chest pain or dizziness, which in turn lead to a fear that something serious may be wrong (such as a heart attack) or that something undesirable might happen (eg fainting or being sick). This triggers more anxiety, making the physical symptoms worse. Panic attacks strike quickly, sometimes out of the blue, and grow fast.



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What are the signs?

Anxiety has many physical symptoms that can indicate that your body is on high alert. Physical symptoms can also go hand in hand with changes of personality that may indicate an issue. Not everyone will experience all of these but they can be indicators of high anxiety.

- Churning stomach
- Feeling light-headed
- Heart racing (palpitations)
- Nausea- feeling sick
- Grinding your teeth
- Needing to go to the toilet more often
- Sweating and flushes
- Pins and needles in fingers and toes
- Unable to sit still
- Headaches and other aches and pains
- Insomnia and problems sleeping
- Panic attacks
- Unable to relax- feeling on edge all the time
- Feeling like things are always going to go wrong
- Low mood
- Canceling plans last minute
- Rumination- thinking about a situation again and again



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What's the difference between anxiety and having an anxiety disorder?

Experiencing anxiety at times of stress is a very normal part of being human so at what point should you get concerned that heightened anxiety in a young person is becoming more of an issue?

The key characteristic of normal everyday anxiety is that it's usually short-term and related to a specific stressor (perhaps an event like an exam or a driving test). Once the stressful incident or trigger has passed then anxiety levels decrease, and a person tends to feel relaxed again. Prolonged anxiety that remains high once the initial stressor has passed could indicate that an anxiety disorder has developed. When a person stays at a heightened state of anxiety for long periods of time this can begin to significantly impact their wellbeing and quality of life. At this point it is time to suggest a visit to the GP would be a good idea.

The most diagnosed anxiety disorder is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), it's often characterized by excessive worry about everything (rather than one specific event) and lasts at least 6 months and gets in the way of leading a normal life.

Can it be treated?

Anxiety disorders are best treated with a combination of approaches which address the different aspects of anxiety: the thought patterns, which respond very well to cognitive behaviour therapy, an approach which looks at how your thinking can influence and trigger emotions, and the physical symptoms, which can be controlled and limited by learning relaxation techniques.

Treatments can be effective if they reduce general stress levels: approaches which help relax or de-stress can be effective as part of a combination of treatments.

Drug treatment can also be helpful in treating anxiety. Some anti-depressants can help, particularly if the anxiety is triggering obsessional (round and round) thoughts, or making it hard to concentrate or function normally. Other treatments can help to limit and control physical symptoms, especially in circumstances where these might be problematic - e.g. exams or public speaking.

