

Anxiety

Feeling anxious is a survival response to situations where there are dangers or threats. However, some people react more intensely to these situations.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is our body's way of helping us prepare for stressful situations. We all feel anxious from time to time, and it can be particularly useful in helping keep us safe or motivating us to keep going.

Anxiety can be difficult to spot because it presents in many ways. Everyone experiences anxiety differently, but there are some common signs:

- worried thoughts
- racing heart
- tightening of throat or chest
- feeling tense
- sweating or feeling dizzy
- shaking
- nausea
- stomach issues
- racing thoughts and worries.

These are all normal responses, but for some people these can feel overwhelming; are experienced more intensely; last for longer; or they may occur where anxiety isn't a common reaction. And this could be a sign they are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing an anxiety condition.

Whether a diagnosis is made (by a health professional) will depend on how often, how easily and how intensely a child or young person experiences the symptoms and how much it interferes with everyday living.

Signs and symptoms of anxiety conditions

Some common signs and symptoms of anxiety conditions include:

- feeling more anxious than others their age and level
- having anxious feelings that are consistently very intense
- experiencing anxious feelings that persist well after the stressful event has passed
- feeling so distressed that it interferes with their capacity to learn, socialise and do everyday things.

The good news is there are many effective treatments and supports available to help people manage their condition.

Be You Resources

Find out more about how you can [support children and young people experiencing anxiety](#).

How do anxiety conditions develop?

A range of factors are thought to contribute to anxiety conditions. Various factors can play a role, including:

- family history of mental health conditions
- personality factors
- learnt responses
- physical health problems
- other mental health conditions
- substance use
- ongoing stressful events.

Possible triggers for ongoing stressful events include transitions (such as starting at a school), changes in living arrangements, family relationship problems, major emotional shock following a stressful or traumatic event, experiencing bullying, verbal, sexual, physical or emotional abuse or trauma, and death or loss of a loved one.

What signs should I look out for?

Anxiety is a survival response to situations where there are dangers or threats – it helps us to respond efficiently.

However, some people react more quickly or more intensely to such situations. It can be helpful to know the signs to look out for across different age groups.

Age is important

There are similarities but also some key differences in the way anxiety manifests in people of different ages and developmental stages. For example, if a baby cries when an unfamiliar person wants to hold them, their fear seems perfectly normal for this age. However, if a 12-year-old withdraws or refuses to talk to new people and avoids situations where it may be expected, this may be a sign of a more serious anxiety issue.

No matter their age, both children and young people can have difficulty finding the words to express what they're feeling – their behaviour may be the best clue.

Early childhood

Young children are often in the early stages of learning how to recognise, understand and respond appropriately to their emotions. Anxiety conditions are less likely to be formally identified in children under five, partly because certain fears are considered normal – for instance, fear of the dark, visiting unfamiliar places or separating from a family member.

Behaviours that might indicate they're experiencing higher levels of anxiety than average could include:

- taking a long time to calm or settle following separation from a family member on a regular basis
- frequently experiencing strong emotions that are more regular or severe than others of the same age
- low interest or significant reluctance to interact in social situations
- experiencing difficulties getting involved in unfamiliar activities
- experiencing difficulties separating from a favourite educator
- significant difficulty or distress during change or transitions

Many children in early childhood will display one or more of the above behaviours. However, if they happen on a regular basis and interfere with the child's ability to learn and engage in social relationships, then it could be a sign they need additional support.

Primary school years

As children's thinking skills expand and become more abstract, they can develop fears of imaginary creatures and monsters. They may also worry about schoolwork, tests and their social relationships. As they grow older, they may have anxiety about family relationships or global issues such as war or famine.

The following behaviours might indicate a primary school age child is experiencing higher levels of anxiety than average:

- Wanting things to be perfect
- Reluctance to ask for help
- Asking for reassurance excessively
- Difficulty joining in
- Requests to go to sick bay
- Changes in their behaviour.

Adolescence

During adolescence, common sources of anxiety include starting secondary school, fitting in with peers, exam stress, body image

issues and family relationships. Worrying about these things isn't necessarily a sign of a mental health condition. Individuals may need additional support if they experience the following:

- Appearing withdrawn and reluctant to participate in classroom activities or social situations
- Oversensitivity to criticism or feedback
- Perfectionism and fear of failure
- Missing classes or excusing themselves to go to the toilet on a regular basis
- Unhelpful thinking and always expecting the worst
- Changes in their behaviour.

Looking beyond behaviour to try to identify what might be underneath can help you respond with understanding and empathy. The important point is to notice if there's a concern and seek further advice and assistance. You can use the [BETLS Observational Tool](#) to gather and document your observations.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people's behavioural and mood changes in the [Notice](#) module.

External links

Beyond Blue – [Anxiety](#)

headspace – [What is anxiety & the effects on mental health](#)

Raising Children Network – [Anxiety in children](#)

ReachOut – [What is anxiety?](#)

Bibliography

Visit [Anxiety](#) to get a list of references for the Fact Sheet.

