

The impact of stress on our overall health is felt by the majority of us - 64% of Australians feel that stress has negatively impacted their mental health and 72% of Australians feel that stress has negatively impacted their physical health.



Developing strategies to cope with stress is increasingly important in today's society, and help with managing stress and its impacts on our health is available.

# Stress & Anxiety

## What is stress?

*"It's important to find things that help and support you, strategies and support differ from person to person, but there are strategies that help and there is hope"*

Stephen - MIEACT Volunteer Educator living with Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Stress is a normal response by both the mind and the body to any pressure or demand, such as an internal thought or external event. Not all stress is negative. Stress helps us get out of bed, motivates us to tackle a challenge in our lives and keeps us safe from physical threats by activating the flight and fight response. A certain amount of stress can help us perform at our best and stimulate creativity.

There have been a number of papers on the predominant stressors in our lives and this will differ depending on circumstances and environment. However, across the board we find commonality such as finance, relationships, illness, loss, work, change and caring for others.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a person's specific reaction to stress. When we're very anxious, we have intense feelings of worry or distress that are not easy to control. Anxiety can interfere with how we go about our everyday lives, and make it hard to cope with everyday challenges. Persistent anxiety can cause extreme emotional distress and can lead to us to developing an anxiety disorder. Anxiety can make someone want to avoid certain situations and places.

The most common types of anxiety disorders are Social Anxiety, specific phobias, Panic Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

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## What symptoms might I notice?

Below are some symptoms that you might experience. It is important to seek professional guidance from a Doctor for a diagnosis.

- Excessive fear
- Change in appetite
- Catastrophising
- Racing heart
- Feeling irritable or agitated
- Relentless worrying thoughts
- Trouble breathing
- Sleeping less or more
- A tight chest
- Panic attacks
- Restlessness
- Overthinking

## Strategies and techniques to help manage anxiety

1. Avoid caffeine and processed food and increase your vegetable intake. Fuelling your body with healthy food helps you maintain your mental health.
2. Mindfulness meditation. Studies have found that redirecting your attention to what is actually happening in the present moment by engaging in mindfulness practise can reduce stress and anxiety.
3. Building positive self-talk by:
  - Acknowledging a particularly challenging or unhelpful thought and reminding yourself that thoughts aren't facts.
  - Consider the evidence for and against this thought.
  - Challenge the thought by speaking to yourself with compassion. What would you say to a friend thinking the same thing?
4. Write a list of what you can and cannot control. Focus your energy on the things that you have influence over.
5. Journaling is an effective way to express emotions, and has been found to enhance both mental and physical well-being.

## What causes anxiety?

Experts are finding that it is not one but a combination of factors that may cause anxiety. There is still a lot to learn in this area. Genetics, family history of mental health, personality factors and ongoing stressful events can all potentially play a role in the cause of anxiety.

## Is anxiety common?

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia. Up to one-third of women and one-fifth of men will experience anxiety at some point in their lives. In 2019, 13.9% of Australian children (4-17) were assessed by a healthcare professional as having a mental illness with 6.9 % experiencing anxiety.

## Treating Anxiety

There are a variety of different treatments available for anxiety. Some are psychological treatments (talking therapies) or physical treatments (medications), others are self-help or alternative therapies. Many people find that using a combination of strategies is helpful.

### Health professional

A counsellor, psychiatrist or psychologist can help someone living with anxiety learn how to cope better with their symptoms so they are not as intense.

### Exercising, good sleep and healthy eating

Research shows that exercising, getting enough sleep and eating healthy can reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety.

### Family and friends

Having a support network around you who you can talk to and rely on in difficult times is important.

### Self-care

Looking after yourself on a regular basis helps keep you mentally healthy. What self-care looks like varies depending on the person. For example: it may take the form of meditation and yoga for one person and reading books, painting or computer games for another.

### Medication

Medication doesn't cure anxiety but it can help people manage their symptoms. Medication may suit some people.

### Free support services

Call Lifeline 13 11 14 or Health Direct 1800 022 222.