

Anxiety Disorders



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TIP

If your child has been diagnosed with a mental illness, it is important that you get as much information as you can. Check out the resources listed at the end of each diagnosis listing and investigate options for support and treatment.

Anxiety disorders are a group of mental illnesses that may cause anxiety—a state of distress, uneasiness, apprehension, or tension. Although it is common for children to be fearful or worried from time to time as they grow up, a child may have an anxiety disorder if he or she continually shows signs of extreme anxiety or fear.

Anxiety disorders can range from mild to severe. The different types of anxiety disorders in children include:

- **GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER:** With this disorder, a child has a significant amount of worry and anxiety about a variety of situations. This anxiety is hard to control. Children with this disorder are often described as “worriers.” They have physical symptoms of anxiety, such as easily tired, sleep problems, muscle tension, upset stomach, acting “edgy,” and irritability. Their worrying interferes with their functioning in social and school settings or in other daily activities.
- **PANIC DISORDER:** With this disorder, a child has repeated periods of intense fear or discomfort, along with other symptoms, such as a racing heartbeat or shortness of breath. These periods are called “panic attacks” and can last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours. Panic attacks often develop without a known cause or without warning and can interfere with your child’s relationships, schoolwork, and development.
- **SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER:** With this disorder, a child worries excessively about his or her primary caregiver. This can lead to not wanting to go to school or socialize outside of the home, having nightmares and worrying about losing their primary caregiver, being unable to sleep alone, and having significant physical symptoms when separated or anticipating separation from their primary caregiver. Separation anxiety is a normal part of infancy and early toddlerhood. If it returns after this development stage, however, it is considered a disorder.
- **SOCIAL PHOBIA:** With this disorder, a child has a significant fear of social or performance situations, fearing that he or she will humiliate or embarrass himself or herself. For children, this leads to anxiety around other kids, not just around adults. The anxiety or fear leads to problems with functioning in social and

In children, anxiety can appear in a variety of forms other than classic “worrying.” Children can express anxiety through emotions like anger or sadness and behaviors like isolating themselves from others.

school settings or in other daily activities. Children with this disorder are often seen by others as “shy.”

- **SPECIFIC PHOBIA:** With this disorder, a child excessively worries about a particular object or situation (for example, flying, spiders, or heights).

In addition, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (p80) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (p84) are also considered anxiety disorders.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Typical signs and symptoms of anxiety disorders include:

- Intense fear (a sense that something terrible is happening or going to happen)
- Racing or pounding heartbeat
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Shortness of breath or a feeling of being unable to breathe
- Trembling or shaking
- Feelings of disconnection and confusion about reality
- Fear of dying, losing control, or losing his or her mind

EVALUATION AND DIAGNOSIS

Anxiety disorders can lead to complications for your child if not recognized and treated appropriately. Anxiety disorders can be diagnosed anytime in childhood or adolescence. If you think your child has an anxiety disorder, your child may need a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation or psychotherapy evaluation. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH EVALUATIONS (p39)**.

TYPICAL CO-EXISTING DIAGNOSES

Many children with one anxiety disorder will end up having more than one anxiety disorder. Common mental health diagnoses that co-exist with anxiety disorders include:

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (p52)
- Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) (p62)
- Depression (p67)
- Learning Disorders (p75)

- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (p80)
- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) (p82)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (p84)
- Speech and Language Disorders (p90)
- Substance Abuse and Dependence (p94)



TREATMENT

A psychotherapist or a child and adolescent psychiatrist can treat anxiety disorders. For more information on mental health specialists, turn to page 106 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

Several types of treatment are effective for anxiety disorders, including psychoeducation, psychotherapy (in particular, cognitive behavioral therapy), and anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medications (in particular, Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors or SRIs). For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT (p147)**.

If the anxiety disorder is affecting the child's ability to learn, adjustments may need to be made in his or her education program. For more information on the school system, turn to page 118 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

RESOURCES

*Helping Your Anxious Child:
A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents* (2000)
By Sue Spence, Vanessa Cobham,
Ann Wignall and Ronald M. Rapee

*If Your Adolescent Has an Anxiety Disorder:
An Essential Resource for Parents* (2006)
By Edna B. Foa and Linda Wasmer Andrews

Pediatric Anxiety Research Clinic
at Rhode Island Hospital
401-444-3003 or 401-444-2178
www.anxiouskids.org