

# UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY DISORDERS

## Caregiver: Get the Facts

What does it mean when a health care professional says “anxiety disorder”?



### Anxiety Disorders

Hearing a health care professional say your youth or young adult has an anxiety disorder can be confusing. The good news is that the emotions and behaviors you have been concerned about are actually symptoms of a treatable disorder. By engaging in treatment and entering recovery, people with an anxiety disorder can manage their symptoms and feel better. Recovery does not necessarily mean a cure. It does mean people are actively moving towards wellness.



When I learned my daughter was diagnosed with anxiety I felt relief. I was relieved because I now better understood the behaviors she exhibited as a child. I have learned to recognize the signs and can assist her better.

—Regina, Parent

It is important to talk with a health care provider about treatment options and additional information. Your provider may be a child and adolescent psychiatrist, general psychiatrist, psychologist, pediatrician, social worker, or other health care provider. If you are concerned that your youth or young adult may have an anxiety disorder, it is important to seek a thorough evaluation. The evaluation includes talking about their symptoms, and conducting blood and urine tests, and perhaps other tests to ensure that there is no underlying medical condition that could be causing the symptoms. It is also important to ensure that your youth or young adult can tolerate medication, if recommended as part of a treatment plan.

### What do we mean by recovery?

*Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.<sup>1</sup>*

*Recovery focuses on wellness and resilience, encouraging [people] to participate actively in their own care.<sup>2</sup>*



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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## What is an anxiety disorder?

People with anxiety disorders worry excessively. These feelings go well beyond the typical kind of worry that is appropriate to life situations and can help people focus and be alert. The apprehensiveness that your youth or young adult feels with an anxiety disorder occurs almost daily and may be overwhelming. Symptoms of an anxiety disorder include restlessness, a heart-pounding sensation, muscle tension and fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and/or sleep disturbances. These feelings are severe enough to interfere with day-to-day functioning in school, at work, or in social situations.

There are 3 types of anxiety disorders: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), phobias, and panic disorders. Some youth and young adults have milder forms of anxiety disorders that do not last forever and respond well to treatment.



Others with more severe forms of anxiety disorders may experience lifelong symptoms, with the specific type of anxiety changing over time or including mood symptoms. However, treatments for an anxiety disorder that involve medications, psychotherapy, and other elements of an individualized treatment program can help your youth or young adult to be more resilient, manage symptoms, improve everyday functioning, and help them to lead a full, meaningful life. An individualized treatment program can include positive family and peer support.

### What caused this?

Researchers and health care professionals do not completely understand what causes anxiety disorders. It is unlikely that a single factor causes an anxiety disorder. It is most likely caused by a combination of things such as genetics (i.e. family history of anxiety disorders), chemical or other changes in the brain, and/or environmental factors. Traumatic experiences can also contribute to the development of psychiatric disorders. If your child has experienced a traumatic incident, it is critical to share that information with their mental health specialist and pediatrician.

### Should I have known?

It is very difficult for parents and caregivers to know if their youth or young adult is acting like a typical youth or young adult or if their moods and behaviors are actually symptoms of an anxiety disorder. Teenagers may be moody or withdrawn at times and are sometimes reluctant to talk openly about emotions or behaviors. Perhaps you tried to ask questions but were not able to get answers. Working with a trained health care professional is important to help you and your youth or young adult understand whether or not they have an anxiety disorder and how to start moving forward.<sup>4</sup>

### What do we mean by resilience?

*Resilience is the ability to respond to stress, anxiety, trauma, crisis, or disaster. It is critical in recovery [from mental disorders].<sup>3</sup>*

## What are the treatment approaches?

An anxiety disorder can be managed in many ways. This includes the use of psychotherapy or a combination of medication(s) and therapy. You should discuss treatment options with your youth or young adult and their health care provider, and make decisions based on individual health goals and priorities. Youth or young adults of consenting age may need to provide written consent for parents or caregivers to participate on the treatment team. Decisions may be made based on many factors, including the severity of symptoms, but should always account for your youth or young adult's health goals, priorities, and ambitions. It is important to talk to your health care providers about other types of treatment, such as complementary medicine, as well as programs that can provide additional support related to education, employment, housing, and vocation and career development. It is also important to encourage good self-care, such as a healthy diet, exercise, sleep, and abstinence from illicit drugs. Understanding how treatment works will help you to play an active role in your youth or young adult's recovery.

“Connect with a family support organization because you will need that peer-to-peer support. Do not feel ashamed or blame yourself for your child's mental health diagnosis.”

—Muriel, Parent

### *Medications*

Medications (particularly a class of medications called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs) can help manage many of the symptoms of an anxiety disorder. Each person reacts differently to these medications. For that reason, the prescribing health care professional may try different doses and different kinds of medication before finding the most effective approach for your youth or young adult. Finding the best medication and the most effective dose for your youth or young adult may take time. In milder cases of anxiety disorders, medication may not be necessary. Therapy or lifestyle changes (e.g., smoking cessation, decreased caffeine intake, regular exercise, or mindfulness exercises) may be sufficient to manage symptoms.

### *Therapy*

Health care professionals may recommend behavioral therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, or other forms of psychotherapy as stand alone treatment or in combination with medications depending on severity of symptoms. Psychotherapy helps your youth or young adult develop behaviors and daily routines that can protect them from experiencing frequent, severe, or prolonged symptoms.

### *Support*

Peer and family support is also an important part of treatment for an anxiety disorder. Positive family members, caregivers, and peers can be part of a comprehensive treatment team. As a partner on this team, you can provide important support and encouragement to help your youth or young adult stay focused on reaching their treatment and recovery goals. Additionally, talking with other caregivers who also have a child diagnosed with an anxiety disorder can help you to learn more and know what to expect. You may benefit from having someone further along in the process with whom to discuss your own questions, thoughts, and feelings.

## Is this my fault?

No, it is not. Decades of medical research provide evidence that anxiety disorders and other mental disorders can be the result of a complex interaction of genetics and biological, environmental, social, physical, and emotional influences. None of the contributing factors alone are sufficient to cause a mental disorder. Your youth or young adult is not to blame and neither are you.



## How common is this disorder?

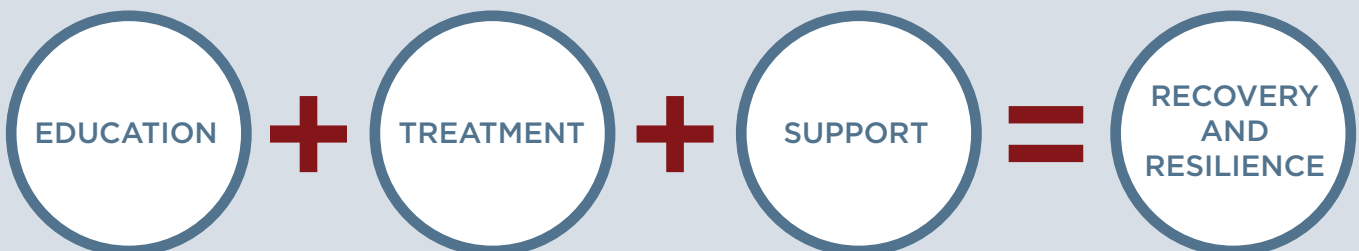
Anxiety disorders represent one of the most common forms of mental disorders among children and adolescents, but they often go undetected or untreated. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that the rate of anxiety disorders among 3-17-year-olds is in the range of 3 percent (current symptoms) to 4.7 percent (ever reported having anxiety).<sup>4</sup>



## How can I help?

Parents, caregivers, and family members can be important partners in treatment and recovery from an anxiety disorder. You can play a major role by monitoring symptoms and responses to medication changes and encouraging your youth or young adult to stick with their treatment and treatment plan. Alert your health care providers about your youth or young adult's symptoms, such as any particular fears or phobias, including social situations, insomnia, or persistent low mood, as well as if he or she uses drugs, excessive caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol. Seek help immediately if your youth or young adult has thoughts or plans of harming themselves or others (For more information, see the hotline and website below\*). There is significant evidence that your involvement can improve treatment outcomes. Your own self-care is also an important part of caring for a child with a mental health disorder. Self-care may include talking to your own mental health professional, friends, or family, as well as joining a local support group through the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health or the National Alliance on Mental Illness, exercising, getting a good night's sleep, or meditation.

\* **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255).** <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>



Where can I  
learn more and  
get support?

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<sup>1</sup> (2012). *SAMHSA's Working Definition of Recovery*. SAMHSA.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2005). *Position Statement on Use of the Concept of Recovery*.

<sup>3</sup> (2013). *SAMHSA Annotated Bibliography*.

<sup>4</sup> Perou, R., Bitsko, R. H., Blumberg, S. J., Pastor, P., Ghandour, R. M., Gfroerer, J. C., et al. (2013). *Mental Health Surveillance Among Children - United States, 2005-2011*. Retrieved from: [http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6202a1.htm?s\\_cid=su6202a1\\_w](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6202a1.htm?s_cid=su6202a1_w)

**American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**  
[http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Resource\\_Centers/Anxiety\\_Disorder\\_Resource\\_Center/Home.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx)

**Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)**  
<http://adaa.org>

**Find Youth Info**  
<http://www.findyouthinfo.gov>

**Mental Health America**  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net>

**National Alliance on Mental Illness**  
<http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders>

**National Institute of Mental Health**  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>

**National Center for Complementary & Integrative Health**  
<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/integrative-health>

**National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health**  
<http://www.ffcmh.org/>

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**  
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>  
1-800-273-TALK (8255)

**Ok2Talk**  
<http://ok2talk.org>

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/disorders/mental>

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline**  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

**The Family Run Executive Director Leadership Association**  
<http://www.fredla.org>

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