

# Anxiety

## Learn, think, do

**Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problem in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that anxiety affects over 2 million people aged 16–85 years, the majority being women.**

Dr Mandy Deeks, Jean Hailes psychologist and Head of Translation, Education and Communication, says that some anxiety is normal and alerts us to danger. “Anxiety is part of being human. To ensure our survival, the human body and mind are programmed to feel anxiety,” says Mandy.

### Ottelene’s Story

“You can worry about anything! I worry about myself and getting old. I worry about my family and whether people will remember me when I’m gone. I also worry about the world my grandchildren will grow up in.”

Ottelene, 81

However, it is important to recognise when anxiety is holding you back and becoming a problem. “For some people, anxiety and worries become excessive, constant and distressing enough to interfere with work, relationships and enjoyment of life,” she says.

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is an unpleasant feeling of nervousness, apprehension, distress and fear that something bad is happening or about to happen. You can feel anxious without necessarily having an anxiety disorder.

This is what worry and anxiety feels like. Those niggling feelings, like pulling a thread, can become all-consuming to the point that you have to pull it, even at the expense of everything else.

The adjacent quote comes from an amazing 81 year old woman interviewed for a new online resource Jean Hailes has developed about anxiety. This website is dedicated to helping women understand worry, anxiety and anxiety disorders.

The website encourages people to do three things: learn, think and do: to learn about anxiety, think about anxiety in your life and discover ways to manage and live with anxiety.

### Learn

Understanding whether what you are feeling is worry, anxiety or an anxiety disorder is important, according to Jane Fisher, the Jean Hailes Professor of Women’s Health at Monash University.

“Once you know what level of anxiety you are experiencing, learning to recognise unhelpful ways of thinking is an important first step,” she says. “This includes feeling that something bad will happen or having an excessive sense of dread. Sometimes we jump to conclusions; picking the negative things rather than seeing the positive. We may also see things as black and white (good or bad), with no grey or middle ground.”

### What is the difference between worry and anxiety?

Professor of psychiatry, Director of the Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre, Jayashri Kulkarni, says “anxiety is the clinical term for having emotional, psychological and behavioural fears, whereas worry is the word people most often use for how they express that anxiety.”

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a grey knit sweater and dark pants, is sitting in a field of tall, dry grass. She is holding a piece of straw in her hands and looking thoughtfully to the side. The background is a soft-focus landscape under a clear sky.

“When you worry,  
it’s like pulling a  
thread on a jumper...  
the whole thing  
unravels.”

An anxiety disorder is more than just worry or stress. People with an anxiety disorder have feelings that cannot be easily controlled and this often means having difficulty coping with daily life.

### Symptoms of anxiety

Signs of anxiety include physical changes in your body such as a racing heart, sweaty hands, a tightness in the chest, butterflies in your stomach, wobbly legs, diarrhoea, fast breathing and swallowing, and sleeplessness. There are also changes in the way you think and act, like having difficulty concentrating, feeling panicky or overwhelmed or wanting to hide away.

“It’s also important to remember that the perception of anxiety is highly personal,” says Mandy, who co-authored the new website. “What you find stressful and overwhelming, might be quite manageable for someone else.”

“For instance, at midlife so much is happening. Often you are in the ‘middle’, with physical changes to your body, menopausal changes, work and relationships. Some find this unsettling; others might see it as a time of greater freedom, opportunity and, of course, no more periods,” she explains.

### Worry at your life stage

Women play vital roles in the community, but some major life events such as trying to get pregnant, motherhood, menopause, managing a chronic illness or being a carer can be very stressful.

Anxiety can occur at any time in life. However, there are common themes that seem to affect women at various stages.

- Young women may worry about study, career paths, their looks, friends, relationships and the future.

- Women in middle years may be facing fertility issues, changes in career, changing family dynamics and menopause.
- Older women may feel anxious about health, money, safety and feeling isolated or alone.

### How normal is anxiety?

According to Jayashri, anxiety is a universal experience; in small amounts, it’s a good thing. “It can keep us safe, help us focus and motivate us to achieve what we may believe we are unable to achieve,” she says. “It’s only a problem when anxiety gets out of hand, when you experience many physical and emotional symptoms and cannot function in your daily life.”

### Think

The anxiety website provides a place for you to assess your levels of worry and anxiety. Using simple questions, these tools can help to identify if what you are feeling is worry, anxiety, or whether you are suffering from an anxiety disorder.

Start by asking yourself these three questions:

#### 1 Do you feel worried a lot of the time?

Worry is when you feel uneasy, troubled or concerned about specific things or situations. These feelings are unpleasant but you can still get on with daily life, and they usually only last a short time.

#### 2 Are you frequently tense, irritable, fearful?

Anxiety is an unpleasant feeling of nervousness, apprehension and fear that something bad is happening, or may happen. Anxious feelings may cause physical symptoms like sweating and feeling shaky, and emotional symptoms like feeling that you need to run away. Anxious feelings tend to last longer than worry.

#### 3 Are these feelings interfering with your daily life?

An anxiety disorder is when you have constant, excessive worry and feel frightened about future uncertainties, real or imagined. This level of anxiety interferes with daily life and causes significant physical and emotional distress.

Remember that there are many types of anxiety disorders. Speak to your GP if you think you are experiencing an anxiety disorder.

Some of the different types of anxiety disorders are:

**Generalised anxiety disorder:** feeling anxious and worried about daily situations. These feelings are usually out of proportion to the circumstances concerned.

**Phobias:** a specific fear of something like spiders or even social situations where you may be embarrassed or judged.

**Panic disorder:** frequent and unexpected panic attacks that usually last a few minutes, but can be so intense that it feels like a heart attack. These occur when the body’s normal anxiety response is not working properly and there is no way the person can relieve themselves of the feelings.

**Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD):** having intrusive, repeated thoughts (such as thinking there are germs everywhere) and trying to make these thoughts go away by performing certain behaviours (compulsions such as repeated hand washing).

**Post-traumatic stress disorder:** experiencing significant anxiety after a traumatic or distressing event. People with PTSD tend to re-live and avoid reminders of the event. Common traumas include car accidents, natural disasters and being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.



### Carleen's Story

"It's terrifying. I feel physically and mentally paralysed. Thank God for the filing room where I have spent many hours hiding because I felt too anxious to deal with work."

Carleen, 23

### Do

According to Jane Fisher, after you've recognised unhelpful ways of thinking, you can practise more helpful ways of thinking to help you develop problem-solving skills.

#### Try these practical tips next time you feel anxious:

- Focus on the present moment
- Take deep breaths
- Find out what you can control
- Ask yourself: will this matter in a week? A month? A year?
- Listen to music you like
- Take some time out
- Laugh
- Go outside and take a break for a few minutes
- Eat something nutritious
- Visit your GP
- Speak to a registered psychologist

#### Further information

To learn more about anxiety go to [anxiety.jeanhailes.org.au](http://anxiety.jeanhailes.org.au)

Learn about anxiety  
Think about anxiety in your life  
Ways to manage and live with anxiety

“It’s never too soon, or too late, to think about bone health and to do as much as you can to maintain your bone strength.”

