

Stress can become a serious illness

Stress that is not treated can lead to serious illness. A person who feels ongoing and unresolved stress may go on to develop significant medical illnesses or an anxiety disorder (which in turn can lead to a clinical depression).

Stress occurs when the demands being made on a person are greater than their ability to cope. When stress turns into a serious illness, it is important to get professional help as soon as possible.

Stress can contribute to serious medical disorders

There is growing evidence that stress may contribute to physical illness such as cardiovascular disease (although this link remains controversial and research is ongoing). Whatever the cause, physical diseases need appropriate medical management before any attempt is made at stress management. Discuss with your doctor how stress management may be used to support more conventional forms of treatment.

Stress can also develop into an anxiety disorder

Almost everyone experiences some anxiety. This is normal. Anxiety disorders are different from everyday anxiety because they are more severe, can persist and may interfere with a person's daily life. The good news is that anxiety disorders can be successfully treated.

Common anxiety disorders

Common anxiety disorders are:

- **Panic disorder** – a condition where a wave of sudden panic overtakes the person for no apparent reason. The person experiences many physical symptoms. People tend to avoid situations that they fear might trigger an anxiety attack.
- **Specific phobias** – fears of particular situations or things: for example, a fear of heights, open spaces, spiders, snakes or blood. This also leads to the person avoiding situations.
- **Agoraphobia** – fear of a public place, such as a shopping centre or park, or of being away from a place of 'safety' such as one's home. This is based on a fear that escape from this place may be impossible and anxiety will become overwhelming.
- **Social anxiety disorder** – a fear of the scrutiny and judgement of others, including a fear that the person will behave in a way that is embarrassing or causes others to think negatively of them, such as when speaking, eating or writing in public.
- **Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** – experienced as ongoing distress and intrusive re-living of experiences as 'flashbacks' or nightmares **months** after experiencing or witnessing a real and very distressing event such as a disaster, accident, war or torture, violent death or assault.

Other anxiety disorders

Other anxiety disorders include:

- **Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)** – experienced as uncontrollable intrusive thoughts, fears or images and a compulsive urge to repeat certain often irrational behaviours to lessen the anxiety.
- **Acute stress disorder** – a form of posttraumatic stress disorder that happens **soon after** experiencing or witnessing a very distressing event.
- **Generalised anxiety disorder** – a disorder in which a person is constantly worried, often about irrational things, and cannot be reassured. Most commonly they worry unnecessarily about their health, the safety of members of their family or their finances.

Symptoms – anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders can have a variety of symptoms including:

- Anxiety, leading to avoidance of particular associated situations
- Panicky feelings
- Palpitations (pounding heart, accelerated heart rate)
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath or smothering sensations
- Feelings of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea (upset stomach)
- Feeling dizzy, faint or light-headed
- Derealisation (the world feels different and unfamiliar)
- Depersonalisation (the body feels different)
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Hot or cold flushes
- Indecision
- Apprehension and worry.

Treatment – anxiety disorders

Anxiety is a very treatable condition. There are many different psychological and drug treatment options. Some treatments work for some people and not for others. Treatments need to be individually decided on and regularly reviewed to make sure they are effective. Separately and in combination psychotherapy and drug therapy generally produce good results.

Untreated anxiety disorders can lead to depression

Untreated anxiety disorders can lead to serious depression. Depressive illness is common. Australian studies have estimated that 17 per cent of Australians will suffer from depression at some time in their life.

Depression is about twice as common in women as in men. The most common time in life for people to suffer from depression is in their 40s; however, it can develop at any age.

Depression is often associated with an increased incidence of suicide. The annual suicide rate for people with depression is 3–4 times higher than that of other psychiatric disorders.

Symptoms – depression

The symptoms of major depression include:

- Depressed mood with overwhelming feelings of sadness and grief
- Loss of interest and pleasure in all or most activities
- Insomnia (inability to sleep) or hypersomnia (constant sleepiness) almost every day
- Significant weight loss (without dieting) or weight gain
- Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and helplessness
- Inability to concentrate or think, indecisiveness
- Physical symptoms of restlessness or being slowed down
- Recurrent thoughts of death and suicide and, sometimes, suicide attempts.

Treatment – depression

There are many different ways to treat depression. There are also a variety of drugs available. Some treatments work for some people and not for others. Treatments need to be individually decided on and regularly reviewed to make sure they are effective and to minimise side effects of drugs. A combination of psychotherapy and drug therapy generally produces the best results.

Psychological treatments

Common psychological treatments for depression include:

- Supportive psychotherapy – dealing with the 'here and now', problem solving
- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) – changing the way you think and behave
- Group therapy – working in a group to learn from and share with others
- Behaviour therapy – altering a particular behaviour
- Debriefing – going over issues to understand and learn from them
- Psychodynamic psychotherapy – psychoanalysis is a form of intensive psychotherapy
- Counselling
- Relaxation therapy – for example yoga, meditation or deep breathing.

Medical treatments

The available drugs fall into a number of categories:

- **Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** – for example, fluvoxamine (Luvox), fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), citalopram (Cipramil) or paroxetine (Aropax).
- Serotonin-noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor – for example, venlafaxine (Efexor).
- **5HT2 antagonist** – for example, mianserin (Tolvon).
- **Reversible inhibitor of monoamine oxidase** – for example, moclobemide (Aurorix).
- **Monoamine oxidase inhibitors** – for example, phenelzine (Nardil) or tranylcypromine (Parnate).
- **Tricyclic antidepressants** - for example, imipramine (Tofranil) or amitriptyline (Saroten).

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Community mental health service
- Your local hospital
- Psychologist or counsellor
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline (for children aged under 18) Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Suicide Help Line Tel. 1300 651 251
- Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria Tel. (03) 9830 0533 or 1300 ANXIETY (269 438)
- Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria) Tel. (03) 9427 0406

Things to remember

- Untreated stress can lead to serious illness.
- Anxiety and depression can be treated in a range of ways.
- It's important to get help if you feel you can't cope.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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