UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY DISORDERS

DID YOU KNOW: Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problem in the country, affecting 1 in 5 South Africans every year![5]

Anxiety can affect anyone, including the people we admire. Many famous and highly successful people struggle with anxiety issues in their daily lives, including media executive Oprah Winfrey and Marvel movie star Chris Evans.[8,9] Even some of South Africa's favourite sports stars, like former Springbok AJ Venter, have opened up about their experiences with anxiety and mental health issues.[10]

Struggling with anxiety? You're not alone!

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear, which we all experience from time to time.[1] Worry is a normal human emotion, and feeling anxious is a healthy response to stressful or difficult situations.[1,2,3] But when those anxious feelings become overwhelming and start interfering with your everyday life, it's a sign that you may have an anxiety disorder.[1,3]

Why some anxiety is normal

When you're in a stressful situation or feeling threatened, you'll start to feel anxious: your heart will race, you'll start to sweat, you may feel shaky and nauseous.[3] You feel this way because your brain is releasing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline,[1] preparing you to deal with the threat by standing up to it or running away from it.[3] This is known as your body's 'fight or flight' response.[1,3]

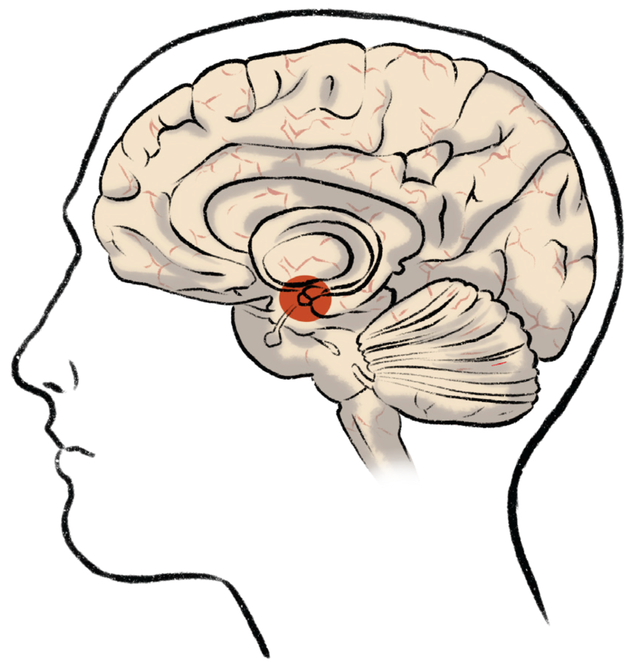
When anxiety becomes a problem

Feeling anxious can be useful as it helps you to deal with challenges,[1,3] but you should feel better once the situation is resolved. People with anxiety disorders will feel ongoing and unmanageable levels of anxiety, whether they are in a stressful situation or not.[1]

Understanding your brains alarm bells:

Why does anxiety feel the way it does?

Think about the reason you would install a burglar alarm or a smoke alarm in your house. These warning systems let you know when something dangerous is happening – like a break-in or a fire. The amygdala is your brain's alarm system.[6,7] It's the part of your brain that can sense danger and trigger the release of stress hormones, activating your fight or flight response as these hormones surge through your body.[6,7]



The amygdala's purpose is to help you respond to the perceived danger, by making you faster, stronger and more alert in case you need to fight or flee.[6,7] That's why your heart will start pounding, your breathing will speed up and your muscles will get tense. [6,7]

Your amygdala is there to protect you, just like an alarm system. But sometimes that system might be set off by a false alarm; your smoke alarm might go off when you burn a piece of toast, or your burglar alarm could be triggered by the neighbour's cat walking past your window![6]

In the same way, your amygdala can't always tell the difference between a real threat and a false alarm.[6] It could flood your body with stress hormones when there is no need to fight or flee from a threat, leaving you feeling overwhelmed by anxious feelings with no way of releasing them.[6] Some people may also have an overactive amygdala (a very sensitive alarm system), making it difficult to keep anxious feelings in check.[7] If your brain's alarm system is always 'switched on' and you're in a constant state of anxiety, you will start to feel tired and ill, and unable to go about your day-to-day routine as normal.[2,3]

Different types of anxiety disorders

There are many different types of anxiety disorders, the most common being:

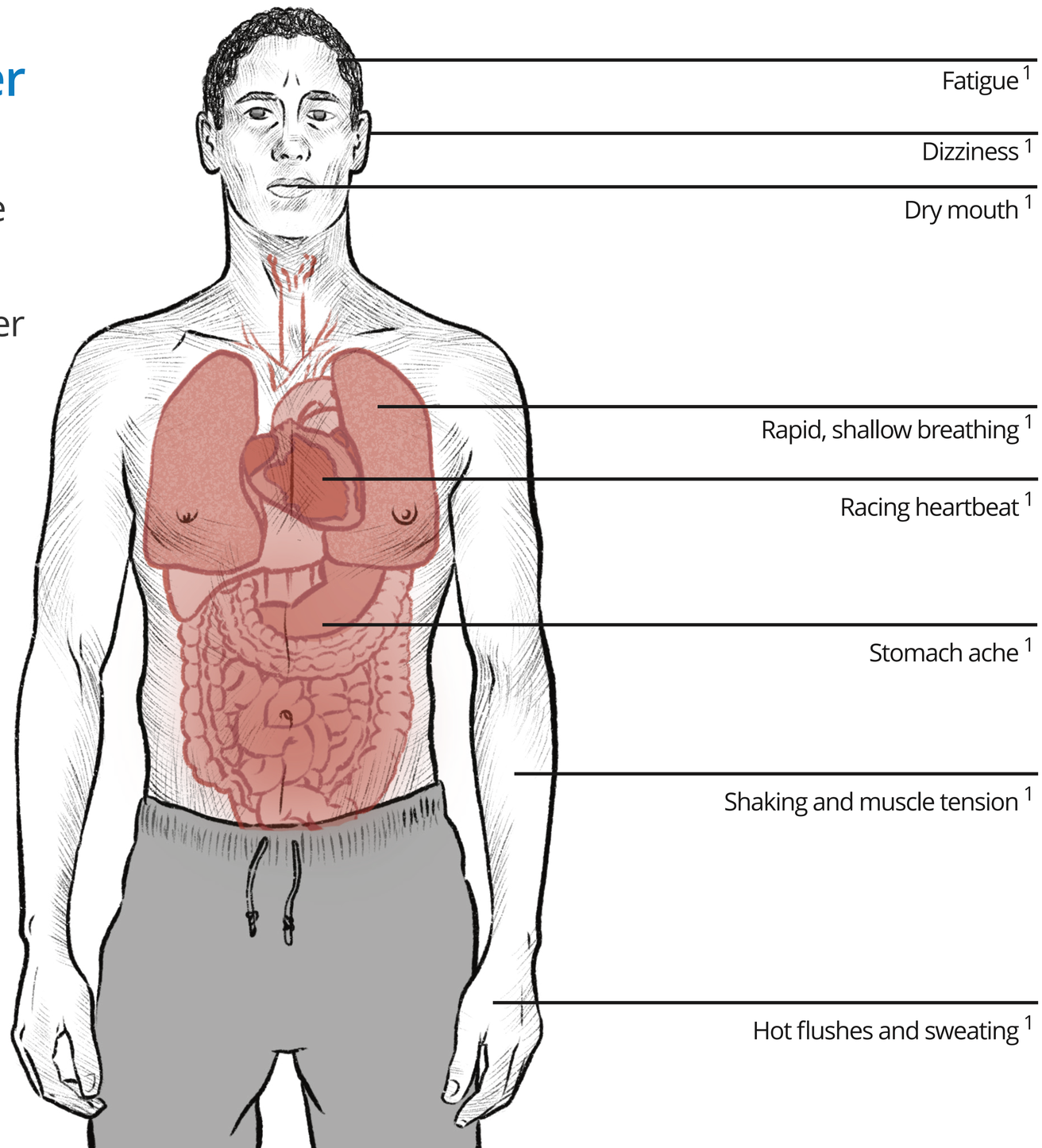
- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD):** Persistent feelings of worry, dread and lack of control.[1]GAD often co-exists with depression and other anxiety disorders.[1]
- **Panic disorder:** Characterised by intense panic attacks, with symptoms including chest pain,dizziness, sweating and chills, nausea and a racing heart.[1]
- **Social anxiety disorder:** Intense fear or dread of social or performance situations, from meeting new people to speaking in public.[1]
- **Phobias:** An overwhelming aversion to a specific situation, object or place.[1]
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** Persistent anxiety symptoms caused by a previous life-threatening or traumatic experience.[1]
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD):** Repetitive, often upsetting intrusive thoughts and compulsions.[1]

Symptoms of an anxiety disorder

Anxiety feels different for everyone, but some symptoms are more common than others.[1] An anxiety disorder can affect you in a number of physical and mental ways.[1]

Common mental symptoms:

- Intense feelings of worry or panic[1]
- Racing thoughts, overthinking[1]
- Heightened alertness and irritability[1]
- Difficulty concentrating[1]
- Trouble sleeping[1]
- Changes in appetite[1]
- Dissociating (feeling disconnected from your body)[1]
- The urge to self-harm[14]



Some anxiety disorders are also linked to depression.[1]

Causes

Anxiety disorders are complex conditions, and doctors don't fully understand what causes them yet, but there are some factors that can make some people more prone to these conditions than others.[1]

- **Genetics:** People with a family history of anxiety aremore likely to experience anxiety disorders.[1,11]
- **Exposure to trauma:** A traumatic event like abuse or bereavement can trigger an anxiety disorder.[11] However, it's important to note that not everyone affected by anxiety has been through trauma – some people may experience anxiety with no obvious reason behind it.[12]
- **Exposure to life stressors:** Everyday stress or upsetting experiences can lead to anxiety.[1,11] These stresses might include conflict and arguments, financial worries, tests and exams, or social events and public performances.[12]
- **Being female:** An anxiety disorder can affect anybody, but studies show women are more likely to be affected than men.[11]
- **Chronic physical-health conditions:** People experiencing chronic physical illness may be prone to developing anxiety disorders.[11]
- **Medication side effects:** Certain prescription and overthe-counter medications contain active ingredients that can make you feel uneasy or anxious.[1]
- **Hormones:** Hormonal changes and imbalances in thebody can also be a cause of anxiety problems.[13]

Diagnosis and treatment

When diagnosing an anxiety disorder, your doctor will consider your symptoms as well as key factors like your family history, history of trauma, exposure to increased stress, or other issues like depression and substance abuse.[11] If you've been feeling excessively anxious for a period of 6 months or more and it's impacting various areas of your life, your doctor is likely to diagnose you with generalised anxiety disorder.[1,11]

The right treatment can help you to manage or even recover from an anxiety disorder![1]
The treatment your doctor recommends will depend on the type of anxiety disorder/s you have, but there are two primary treatment options:

1. **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT):**
   A therapeutic process that helps you learn how to face upsetting situations and control your anxiety.[14]

2. **Medication:**
   Certain medications can be prescribed to help reduce anxiety; they may work well on their own, but often work best when combined with CBT.[14]

COPING STRATEGIES

While your treatment will depend on your diagnosis, there are also several physical, emotional and social coping strategies you can use on a day-to-day basis, to help yourself manage feelings of anxiety and panic.[15]



- **Breathe:** Symptoms of anxiety often include physical tension, a tight chest and rapid breathing.[1,15] Practice slow, deep abdominalbreathing exercises, to help ease these symptoms when your anxiety levels start to rise.[15]
- **Eat well:** Food can impact your mood, so try to avoid or limit sugary snacks, processed foods and stimulants like caffeine. Foods that cause extreme highs and lows in your blood sugar levels can make you feel restless, irritable and tired.[15]
- **Exercise regularly:** Exercise helps to relieve stress and tension by releasing 'feel-good' hormones known as endorphins.[15] Choose a sport or physical activity you enjoy doing, and make it a regular part of your routine.[15]
- **Meditation:** If you are taking prescribed medication, always follow your doctor's directions on when and how to take it.[17] Ask your doctor about any special instructions or possible side effects you should be aware of.[17]
- **Get enough sleep:** A regular sleep schedule can help to regulate an anxious mind. Studies show that the REM phase of sleep is the only time in any 24-hour period that the stress-triggering hormone called noradrenaline is completely shut off in your brain.[16]

Emotional

- **Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness exercises can help you to focus on the present moment and slow down your processing of anxious thoughts and feelings.[15]
- **Don't be too hard on yourself:** Having an anxiety disorder does not mean there is something 'wrong' with you or that you are 'broken'.[15] It's a medical condition that many people experience every day.[15] Treating yourself with acceptance and understanding will help to improve your overall emotional health.[15]
- **Learn your triggers:** Try to recognise the situations that cause your anxiety to rise. This will help you to be more aware, more prepared and better able to manage those situations more effectively.[15]
- **Look for inspiration:** Find the things that make you feel joyful and hopeful when you feel challenged by anxiety, like connection to others or involvement in community projects. Try volunteering at a local school, hospital or animal sanctuary – willing hands are so valuable!

Social

- **Find a support system:** Joining an online or in-person support group will connect you to a community of people who are experiencing the same challenges you are.[15]
- **Talk to someone:** Anxiety can easily make you feel isolated. Talk to trusted friends and family members about what you're going through.[15] Opening up like this can help you to feel more connected and understood.[15]
- **Do good, feel good:** There is evidence that we can improve our self-esteem and sense of wellbeing by doing something to 'earn' those good feelings.[18] This could mean helping others through good deeds and kind actions.
- **Get involved:** Look out for events that you would feel comfortable participating in, to keep connected with your family, friends and community.[15]

Reach out - Useful resources and further reading:

- The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)
- Cipla: Free Mental Health Services in South Africa
- 8 Things Doctors Want You to Know about Anxiety
- 5 Simple Mindfulness Practices for Daily Life
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA): Personal Stories of Triumph
- Former Springbok Opens Up on Mental Health Battle

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