

What Is Anxiety?

At different times in our lives we will all worry about things like our health, finances, or family concerns. However, unlike the mild anxiety that is caused by a specific event and goes away after a short period of time (e.g., giving a public speech or a job interview), more intense anxiety can last at least 6 months and can worsen if it is not treated.

It is common to feel stressed and even normal to experience mild to moderate levels of anxiety from time to time, especially if you are engaged in many activities that place multiple demands on you (e.g., academics, work, family responsibilities, etc.). However, if you are experiencing an ongoing feeling of anxiety that is interfering with your ability to enjoy life, your relationships, or is making it difficult to complete daily activities/responsibilities, then you may be experiencing a more problematic level of anxiety. When anxiety reaches such a level, you may need to take steps to address it head on rather than wishing or hoping that it will pass on its own.

Symptoms of Anxiety

Anxiety can come in many forms. Sometimes anxiety is accompanied by an episode of intense panic, dread, or fear in which an individual may experience chest pain, shortness of breath, racing heart, dizziness, and/or stomach discomfort. Anxiety can manifest as unwanted, repetitive thoughts and compulsive behaviors that seem impossible to stop. Sometimes anxiety is specifically tied to a certain situation, like speaking in public, riding in an elevator, or encountering a dangerous animal.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), anxiety affects about 40 million American adults age 18 years and older (about 18%) in a given year. Anxiety occurs along a continuum and may be experienced by different people in different ways. Sometimes your worries may be connected to a known cause or specific event; there may also be times when you experience feelings of anxiety for no apparent reason.

If you have been experiencing any number of the symptoms listed below for two or more weeks, talking with someone at the Counseling Center can help. As opposed to diagnosing yourself, it is important to meet with a trained professional regarding the symptoms of anxiety that you or others in your life have noticed.

- Excessive worry or obsessive thoughts (often about everyday things even if there is little or no reason)
- Difficulty relaxing
- Restlessness or feeling on edge
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating; your mind "going blank"
- Irritability
- Muscle tension or muscle aches
- Trembling, feeling twitchy or being easily startled
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep

- Sweating, nausea or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath or rapid heartbeat
- Avoidance of activities as a means of reducing distress

Coping with Anxiety

It is important to seek help immediately because anxiety, even in its most severe forms, is treatable and a trained professional can assist you in coming up with a treatment plan. Treatment plans for anxiety are based on the individual's presenting concerns, and may include group or individual psychotherapy, medication, psychoeducation, and other strategies. Students who may wish to consult with a counselor at the **Counseling Center** can make an appointment by calling **312-996-3490** or by stopping by the front desk at **1200 West Harrison Street, 2010 SSB, Chicago, Illinois, 60607** between our regular business hours of 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM.

Outside of professional help, practicing good self-care can assist in effectively coping with anxiety. Effective self care includes:

- Getting enough rest.
- Exercising. Engaging in regular physical exercise releases endorphins in the brain and can decrease anxiety.
- Eating healthy.
- Spending time with friends or family.
- Avoiding drugs (including caffeine!) or alcohol. Though drugs and alcohol might provide temporary relief, they typically add to feelings of anxiety.
- Focus on the positive aspects of your life and try not to dwell on negative aspects. If doing so is initially difficult, try focusing on the positive for a short period of time. For example, allow yourself not to worry for just ten minutes.
- Focus on your breathing. Make sure you are breathing deeply and slowly which will often help the body to slow down and relax.

Additional Online Resources:

American Psychological Association: Help Topics – Anxiety:

<http://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety/index.aspx>

National Institute of Mental Health's Online Publications – Anxiety

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/generalized-anxiety-disorder/index.shtml>

References:

American Psychiatric Association: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2000.

National Institute of Mental Health's Online Publications