



Anxiety

Anxiety is more than feeling stressed or worried. It can be tough, and it can affect your daily life. The good news is that with the right support and skills, anxiety is treatable and you can feel better.

When to get urgent help

If anxiety feels overwhelming, is getting worse, or you are having thoughts about harming yourself or not wanting to be here anymore, please get help now. You deserve support and help is available 24/7.

Call or text 1737 to talk with a trained counsellor any time.

Call 111 if you or someone else is in immediate danger.

You can also **call Lifeline on 0800 543 354 or text 4357.**

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal healthy response to stress, fear or danger that helps us prepare to deal with a threat. It focuses the mind and body on getting ready to deal with threat. When there's a threat our body responds by going through physical changes such as our heart beating faster, our breathing becoming faster, we might start sweating, and feel very tense. This response is sometimes called the 'fight or flight' response, and it prepares us to be able to react quickly when faced with a fearful situation.

Anxiety can help us focus and stay motivated, for example during exams or sport. It becomes a problem when it happens often, feels out of proportion to what is going on, or starts to get in the way of everyday life such as seeing friends and whānau, going to school, university or work, or doing things you enjoy.

If anxiety is sticking around, causing distress, or affecting your daily life, it is a good idea to get support. Reaching out is a strength.



What are the signs and symptoms?

1 in 4 New Zealanders will experience anxiety¹. Everyone experiences anxiety differently, but there are some common signs and symptoms of anxiety that may include:

Physical changes:

- ✂ A racing heart or tight chest
- ✂ Faster breathing or shortness of breath
- ✂ Feeling tense or having aches (especially neck, shoulders and back)

¹ * Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey. Wellington: Ministry of Health. 2006

- ✂ Sweating, shaking, dizziness or light-headedness
- ✂ 'Butterflies', nausea, sore puku, vomiting
- ✂ Migraines/ headaches.

Changes in thoughts:

- ✂ Worrying about things a lot of the time
- ✂ Being unable to control the worries
- ✂ Having trouble concentrating and paying attention
- ✂ Worries that seem out of proportion to the situation
- ✂ Thinking the worse will happen
- ✂ A lot of 'what if' thinking, e.g. what if I can't do this? what if I fail?

Feelings and behaviours:

- ✂ Feeling on edge, restless or irritable
- ✂ Avoiding people or places like school, church, family events, sports or parties
- ✂ Withdrawing from friends and family
- ✂ Finding it hard to relax
- ✂ Having trouble sleeping or feeling exhausted
- ✂ Not feeling like eating or eating more than usual.

What are the common types of anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders are some of the most common mental health challenges experienced by young people. People can experience different types of anxiety disorders, but it's important to know that they can all be treated.

Generalised anxiety

Some people may worry about all sorts of things a lot of the time and they may feel that their worries are out of control or that they can't stop worrying. These worries might include being afraid of natural disasters, worries about their health or their loved one's health, or their school performance. They might feel tense and nervous most of the time, have trouble sleeping or find it hard to concentrate.

Social anxiety

Some people may experience intense anxiety in social situations because of a fear of doing something embarrassing or that people might laugh at them. This may lead a person to start avoiding situations where there are other people, like hanging out with friends or going to work, school or uni, church, social and family events. They might also avoid social activities like going to parties, performing, or speaking in front of others.

Separation anxiety

Some people experience intense fear about being away from parents, caregivers, siblings, or others they feel closely attached to. They also worry about these people being sick or hurt. They may experience worry or distress when being apart from this person, having difficulty going to school or work, and will often struggle with physical complaints due to their anxiety.

Agoraphobia

Some people feel intense anxiety about being in particular environments outside the home. This can include public spaces, public transport, enclosed spaces or crowds. They fear these situations because they worry that something bad could happen or that help wouldn't be available. They actively avoid these places, go there with a lot of distress, or will only go there when with another person.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

People who have experienced or seen a frightening traumatic event may experience symptoms that include having upsetting vivid memories, having nightmares, are easily startled, avoid people or places connected to the trauma, and have difficulty concentrating or feeling emotions. Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is a trauma-related condition that shares many features with anxiety but needs trauma-informed assessment and treatment.

Obsessive-Compulsive disorder

Some people have unwanted or intrusive thoughts that make them feel anxious, or they engage in rituals or compulsions in an attempt to reduce their anxiety such as excessive washing, checking, tapping or mental routines such as counting.

Panic disorder

Some people have recurring panic attacks and ongoing fears they will experience another panic attack. When experiencing panic, people will often think that there is something seriously wrong with their body. As a result of this fear these people will avoid certain situations, afraid that they will experience another panic attack.

Specific phobias

Sometimes a person may experience an intense or extreme fear of a particular situation or object, like being in small spaces or have a fear of heights. Other common phobias include a fear of dogs, injections or spiders. This fear usually leads to a person avoiding the situation or object and/or becoming extremely frightened when faced with the situation or object.

Lots of people avoid things they're scared of. When fears and anxieties get in the way of daily life, or stop us enjoying life, then it's time to get help and support.

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are sudden rushes of intense anxiety or fear together with frightening thoughts and physical feelings, usually peaking within minutes.

Frightening thoughts might include:

- ✕ 'I'm going to die.'
- ✕ 'I can't breathe.'
- ✕ 'This isn't going to stop.'
- ✕ 'I'm having a heart attack.'

Physical feelings might include:

- ✕ pounding heart, chest tightness
- ✕ sweating, shaking
- ✕ difficulty breathing, shortness of breath
- ✕ dizziness or feeling faint
- ✕ feeling sick.

Panic attacks are extremely distressing. Although they are not dangerous in themselves, symptoms similar to panic can sometimes be caused by medical conditions. If panic symptoms are new, severe or different from usual, get medical advice.



What can I do to cope with anxiety?

There are plenty of ways to manage your anxiety so that it doesn't get in the way of your daily life.

What helps

Look after your tinana (body), hinengaro (mind) and wairua (spirit):

- Sleep: keep a regular sleep schedule, wind down routine, and limit screens before bed.
- Movement: regular physical activity helps reduce anxiety symptoms.
- Kai: eat regular balanced meals and stay hydrated.
- Spiritual and cultural wellbeing: connect with your culture, language and faith. Whānau centred and Pacific centred approaches can strengthen resilience.

Notice your thinking patterns

Anxiety can pull us into unhelpful thinking such as "what if" loops or assuming the worst. Learning to spot patterns, test them and respond differently can reduce anxiety. The website www.depression.org.nz has tools that can help you work through thinking patterns.

Be careful with avoidance

Avoiding anxious situations can feel helpful in the short term, but it often makes anxiety stronger. Gradually and safely facing fears with support is one of the most effective ways to reduce anxiety.

Breathing and grounding

Calming the body helps calm the mind. Try slow belly breathing, paced breathing or grounding through the five senses. Practise daily so the skills are there when you need them. The [Mental Wealth website breathing activities](#) are a good place to start.

Alcohol and other drugs

Alcohol, vaping and other drugs can make anxiety worse over time and affect sleep and mood. If you choose to use them, consider cutting back and getting support if it is hard to stop. Check out the [Mental Wealth website](#) for ways to limit your alcohol and other drug use.

Evidence based treatments

Many people improve with self help and support from whānau. Others benefit from professional help. Effective options include:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) including exposure-based therapy for phobias, social anxiety, panic and agoraphobia
- trauma focused therapies such as trauma focused CBT or EMDR for PTSD
- acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based approaches
- psychoeducation and skills training such as sleep, problem solving and emotion regulation
- family and whānau involved support to help with coping at home and school.

Medication

Some people may be offered medication such as antidepressants. These are prescribed by a doctor and need regular review, especially for young people. Medication works best alongside talking therapies and support. Do not stop medication suddenly and talk with the person who prescribed them to you about side effects and safety.

Where to get help

Your GP, psychologist, counsellor or Anxiety NZ. Psychological talking therapy may also be recommended for treating depression.

If you're at school or uni, you may also be able to access a counselling or student wellbeing service.

You can also text or freephone 1737, New Zealand's free support service with qualified and confidential counsellors. Let them know what's going on for you or the person you are concerned about, and they can support you.



Other free helplines

Youthline	0800 376 633, free text 234, webchat at www.youthline.co.nz (7pm – 11pm).
What's UP	0800 942 8787 - Advice & counselling support for 5-18-year old's; 1pm to 11pm.
Kidsline	0800 54 37 54 (0800 KIDSLINE) - Advice & counselling support up to 14 years; 4pm to 6pm weekdays.
Youth Law	0800 884529 (0800 UTHLAW) - Free legal help for children and young people.
OUTLine NZ	0800 688 5463 - Support for sexuality or gender identity issues.
Safe to talk	txt 4334 or online chat to someone - Confidential advice for sexual harm issues.
Samaritans	0800 726 666 - Counselling advice and support.
Healthline	0800 611 116 - General health advice and information from a registered nurse.
Lifeline	0800 543 354 or Text 'Help' to 4357 - Counselling advice and support.

Free online tools & info

 Education & support to look after your mental health, with free web-chat 24/7.	 For when life sux, Aunty Dee can help you solve your problems.	 E-therapy for young people who are feeling down, worried or stressed.
 Online community & support for young people.	 Culturally based tools to support Pacific young people to unleash their full potential.	 Support and advice for managing online safety.
 For whanau and friends to understand what young people go through.	 Support for young people experiencing depression or anxiety.	 A virtual distraction & self soothe kit.
 A step-by-step approach for working through anxiety & depression.	 Learn mindfulness to develop better wellbeing.	 Info & resources for queer & gender diverse youth.

This factsheet was put together in collaboration with Headspace Australia (National Youth Mental Health Foundation Ltd).

Fact sheets are for general information only. They should not be a substitute for medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate & up to date, Le Va gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information.

© 2026 Pacific Inc Limited. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-9951015-0-0 (PDF)