

We all can feel stressed or worried when under pressure, but these feelings usually pass once the stressful situation has resolved or been removed.

Anxiety is more than feeling stressed or worried. It is your body's natural response to stress and sometimes these feelings cannot be easily controlled. It is when these feelings are ongoing and present without any particular reason or cause that anxiety can be problematic. It makes it hard to cope with daily life. Anxiety disorders are the most common form of emotional disorder and can affect anyone at any age.

Feelings of anxiety

Anxiety can create uncomfortable feelings and obvious changes, and symptoms may differ from person to person. These can include:

Rapid breathing

Tightness in the chest

Racing heart

Headache

Tense muscles

Nausea and vomiting

Dry mouth

Disturbed sleep

Sweating

Restlessness



Feelings of anxiety are normal when we sense that something bad is going to happen. But severe or constant anxiety can become intrusive causing a constant feeling of nervousness, distress and unease.

Anxiety and epilepsy

Anxiety is common in many people with a chronic health condition. After depression, anxiety is the most common type of mental health disorder seen in people with epilepsy with it being twice as common as in the general population, yet it is often under-recognised and undertreated.

The relationship between epilepsy and depression has received a lot of attention, but less is known about anxiety disorders which is just as disabling. Anxiety can be linked with epilepsy in ways such as:

- Part of the seizure, sometimes the beginning of the seizure (aura);
- Anticipatory fear associated with an aura indicating an oncoming seizure;
- Fear of having a seizure without warning;
- An after-effect of seizure;
- An unwanted side effect of antiseizure medication;
- As a consequence of not adjusting well to having epilepsy.

However, anxiety can also be unrelated to the epilepsy.

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Anxiety – especially panic attacks and severe anxiety – are overwhelming. They can cause severe physical and emotional responses. Some people with epilepsy worry their anxiety may cause a seizure and some are concerned that their epilepsy may be causing their panic attacks.

What is seizure anxiety?

Seizures by their very nature are unpredictable. It is this unpredictability and the possible loss of consciousness, control and embarrassment during seizures that people with epilepsy fear. Anxiety about having seizures, particularly in public, is very common, especially if that person has already had a bad experience.

If you have anxiety and it is affecting your ability to function day to day, then seek help.

When to get help

It can be difficult to take those first steps in getting help. Anxiety (and depression) can reduce your motivation or confidence to take action and you may feel uncomfortable talking about it. However, effective treatments are available so it's worth seeking support. Seek professional help if:

- the fear and anxiety about having seizures occurs frequently or all the time.
- your seizures are well controlled, but the anxiety remains.
- you are isolating yourself from your friends, family and community.
- you think that the anxiety is related to antiepileptic medications.

What to do

Treatment of anxiety differs for each person. For someone with epilepsy and anxiety, better seizure control (if relevant) also needs to be a goal. Many people have psychological therapy and sometimes anti-anxiety medication may need to be used.

Taking antianxiety medication can help but discuss this with your doctor as some anxiety medications may have affect your seizures or seizure medication. For people with both epilepsy and anxiety, the neurologist may recommend antiepileptic medication that also has anti-anxiety effect.

Things you can do

Some simple lifestyle changes that can really make a difference. Things that you can do include:

1. Learn to manage stress. If you have pressures and deadlines, make a commitment each day to take some time out and do something active or something you really enjoy. Something for you.
2. Learn some relaxation techniques. Physical relaxation methods and meditation techniques really can help. A few minutes each day can help. There are many resources online or apps that can help with this.
3. Look after your physical needs. Eat a healthy diet, keep active and exercise regularly. Get enough sleep and have a good sleep routine. Avoid alcohol, too much caffeine. mood altering drugs, sugar and junk food.
4. Practice [deep abdominal breathing](#).



- Learn to replace negative self talk with coping self talk. When you find you are thinking negatively, note it and try to change it to something more positive. For example, replace *"I can't do this, it's just too hard,"* with: *"This is hard but I can get through it."* It can be helpful to change thoughts that run through your mind. Make a list of frequent negative thoughts and another of positive, believable thoughts to replace them.
- Find online support to interact with people with similar symptoms and exchange ideas. Online therapies or computer-aided psychological therapy, can be just as effective as face-to-face services for people with mild to moderate anxiety and depression. There are many available.

Anxiety can be exhausting and debilitating. Don't suffer alone for too long. It helps to talk to a counsellor or psychologist, who will suggest ways for you to deal with stress in your life and teach you skills to manage anxiety.

Can panic attacks and seizures be confused?

Panic attacks and focal seizures can have similar symptoms which can complicate a diagnosis.⁶ A good description of the episode, from you and a witness can be valuable to help distinguish between the two.

Often medical tests will be needed if the doctor has difficulty determining if you are having seizures or panic attacks, or both.

If your anxiety is having a major impact on your life, ask your doctor about finding an appropriate mental health specialist to provide you with more intensive support.

For more information and support go to:

- **Beyond Blue** – [Anxiety](#) - To learn about anxiety, the treatments, who can help, and useful resources.
- **Head to Health** – [Resources](#): provides a large database for online resources. Just search for anxiety
- **Headspace** – [Anxiety](#) for young people
- **Mindspot** - for [online assessment](#) and treatment of anxiety and depression

References:

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4 Seth A. Mensah, Janine M. Beavis, Ajay K. Thapar, Mike P. Kerr. (2007). A community study of the presence of anxiety disorder in people with epilepsy, *Epilepsy & Behavior*, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 118-124

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