



# Anxiety Disorders: A Guide for Families/Whānau

## What is Anxiety?

Everyone knows what it is like to feel anxious – butterflies in your stomach before an exam, feeling tense when someone is angry with you & the way your heart pounds when you're in danger. It is a normal response that helps people to gear up to face a potentially threatening situation.

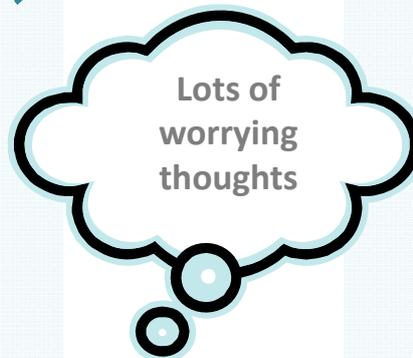
Anxiety is one of the most common things to affect our mental wellbeing. Although everyone feels anxiety differently, there are three main things that people experience.

### 1. Physical Signs

This might include:

- Shaking
- Sweating
- Butterflies in the stomach
- Tense muscles
- Feeling breathless
- Racing heart
- Dizziness
- Tummy aches
- Headaches
- Nausea

### 2. Changes in Thoughts



### 3. Changes in Behaviour

This might include:

- Avoiding friends
- Avoiding school or other situations
- Sometimes using drugs or alcohol
- Becoming overly eager to please others
- Feeling more on edge & irritated

### What are Anxiety Disorders?

Sometimes, **Anxiety** can get out of hand & start to interfere with our lives. Health professionals call this an **Anxiety Disorder**, and it means that:

- You feel like you cannot control the anxiety
- The anxiety is very intense or stays around for a long time
- You start to avoid people or situations (such as school or work)
- It begins to affect your health or relationships with people you're close to.

It is common for people who are going through anxiety to also feel really down. If this starts to interfere with your life, or goes on for longer than a few weeks, it is possible that you may also be experiencing **Depression** (see Fact Sheet on Depression).

### What Causes Anxiety Disorders?

No-one is sure exactly what causes anxiety to make everyday life difficult for people. The following are thought to have an influence on this:

- Some people are more likely than others to spend time thinking about worrying things
- Worries may have been learned from a bad experience (e.g. an anxiety or phobia about dogs might be learned after being bitten by a dog)
- When people close to us are anxious
- Having stressful or traumatic things happen can trigger anxiety
- It can be partly inherited (our mum or dad might have also experienced anxiety).

### What is Social Anxiety?

While it is common to feel anxious in some social situations, Social Anxiety is a feeling of intense anxiety about the possibility that we may do something embarrassing or humiliating in front of other people. This anxiety may be a problem in certain situations such as when you have to make a speech or when eating in front of others. Social anxiety can also be a general fear of being with people. Blushing, feeling shaky, sweaty, tense & sick are common physical signs of social anxiety. You may be convinced that others have noticed this, which can make you more anxious. You might notice yourself avoiding eye contact, being unable to speak, mind going blank & wanting to stay close to familiar people. People with social anxiety disorder might also tend to have negative thoughts about being around other people e.g. *"Why can't I just be normal? I always mess up when I'm around people"*. It can mean you dread facing social situations or avoid them altogether.

### What is Generalised Anxiety Disorder?

This common type of Anxiety can mean you feel extremely anxious for much of the day, on most days, over a long period of time (6 months or more). The worries can be hard to pinpoint but may be about how well you are getting on at school, in sport or with friends. You may try overly hard to fit in or to get things perfect & be hard on yourself. Some people with Generalised Anxiety Disorder also worry a lot about bad things happening like someone dying or about disasters like earthquakes or nuclear wars.

### What are Panic Attacks?

These are also common & can be associated with many types of anxiety. They usually begin in teenage years, though children can also experience panic attacks. When there are many panic attacks, a condition called Panic Disorder may be diagnosed.

Panic attacks are intense feelings & tend to be over within 10 minutes, though sometimes can last longer. They involve physical signs of Anxiety including:

- Racing heart
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling like you're choking
- Numbness or tingling
- Chest pain
- Feeling sick or nauseous
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Feeling unreal/detached
- Chills or hot flushes

A person may think that they are dying, having a heart attack, going crazy, or are about to lose control.



## So your Family/Whānau Member is Anxious or having Panic Attacks – What Now?

As family/whānau your support can make a real difference. Help them see their feelings of Anxiety are ok & be accepting & non-judgmental in your interactions. Focus on their strengths & let them know you believe in them. Keep inviting them to take part in family activities like going for walks or wider whānau celebrations. Be a role model in how you relax & find healthy ways to have fun yourself. Help your young person identify ways that help them relax & self-soothe.

If Anxiety is still an ongoing problem, talk with your young person & suggest that it might help him or her to feel better by getting some help. The first step in getting help is to contact your doctor who may refer your young person to a local Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service. They can help work out how anxiety is affecting your family member, what things are making it worse & whether there is anything else going on (see Info Sheet on Assessment).

The most commonly used treatment involves Psychotherapy (Talking Therapy), most of which involves learning strategies to overcome the anxiety & the length of treatment can vary depending on the individual needs of the young person. Medication can sometimes be useful particularly when the anxiety is difficult to manage or if a person is depressed.

### Helpful Websites:

[www.engagenz.co.nz](http://www.engagenz.co.nz)

[www.phobic.org.nz](http://www.phobic.org.nz)

[www.headspace.org.nz](http://www.headspace.org.nz)

[www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)