

Facts and figures: Anxiety disorders in Australia

Facts about anxiety disorders

- Anxiety disorders affect around 14% of people in Australia aged 16-85.¹

This makes anxiety disorders the most common mental health condition in Australia.

- Only 27% of people with anxiety disorders seek help.²

Of participants with past-year anxiety disorders, only 27% sought professional help.

- The average time from symptom onset to seeking professional help is 8.2 years.³

An Australian study from 2008 reported that for people with anxiety or mood disorders, the average help-seeking delay was 8.2 years.

YouGov Galaxy poll on anxiety disorders

NPS MedicineWise commissioned a survey from YouGov Galaxy in February 2019 of 1027 Australians weighted to represent the general population. The survey investigated people's thoughts on anxiety disorders and their treatment. The following key findings are being published by NPS MedicineWise on 8 April 2019:

- Australians underestimate the time it takes for people to seek professional help.

Most Australians (69%) think that it takes less than 5 years to seek professional help for an anxiety disorder. (An Australian study shows this number is actually 8.2 years.³)

- Australians know where to get reliable information on the treatment of anxiety disorders.

The most common places Australians are likely to go for information on anxiety are a GP (71%) and a psychologist/counsellor (48%). Other common information sources were websites and articles on the internet (37%) and family and friends (28%).

- Australians are aware that face-to-face psychological treatments and prescription medicines are effective.

Australians think effective treatments for anxiety include: lifestyle changes (69%), face-to-face counselling/psychological treatments (66%), meditation and mindfulness techniques (54%) and prescription medicines (46%). Evidence shows that first-line treatments that can be used standalone or in combination are cognitive behaviour therapy (psychological treatment) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressant medicines. Lifestyle changes, meditation and mindfulness techniques can also be helpful.⁴

- Australians are not aware that online psychological treatments can be effective.

Only 13% of Australians think that online treatment programs can be an effective option for treating anxiety disorders. There are actually several online treatment programs available in Australia with evidence showing similar effectiveness to face-to-face psychological treatment options.^{5,6}

- Australians think that non-medicine treatments (such as counselling) for anxiety are expensive.

76% of Australians think that non-medicine treatments for anxiety are expensive. The cost of treatments is dependent on many factors including details of the anxiety condition at hand and the patient's financial status. There is some reimbursement for psychological treatments, and many online options are not expensive or free.

Background: Anxiety disorders and their treatment

- What is an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety is a normal response to a stressful situation. Often described as being nervous, worried or on edge,^{4,7} physiological symptoms of anxiety may include a pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, trembling and the sensation of 'butterflies in the stomach'.⁴ When the anxiety response is experienced frequently over a long period of time, is out of proportion to the stressor (or occurs even in the absence of an apparent stressor), and is affecting a person's daily life, it constitutes an anxiety disorder.⁴

- What are the different types of anxiety disorder?⁴

People with panic disorder (PD) experience sudden attacks of fear or anxiety, often with no obvious trigger, sometimes so severe that they think they may collapse or die.

People with social anxiety disorder (SAD) fear social settings and avoid situations where they may be subject to judgement or scrutiny by others.

Excessive worry over everyday things and being overly concerned about things that could go wrong are characteristics of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD).

People with a specific phobia experience anxiety about particular objects or situations.

- How are anxiety disorders treated?⁴

First-line treatments are the psychological treatment cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (face-to-face or via an online program) or treatment with a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressant medicine.

Other psychological treatments such as mindfulness, acceptance and commitment therapy and problem solving therapy might be helpful.

Other medicine (pharmacological) treatments are possible if treatment with an SSRI has failed.

References

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