Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness or fear that is a normal response to stress.¹ However, when these anxious feelings are persistent, interfere with daily life and are out of proportion to the reality of a situation, an anxiety disorder may be present.² One in three women, compared to one in five men will experience an anxiety disorder in their lifetime,³ and anxiety disorders are the leading contributor to the burden of disease in Australian girls and women aged five to 44.⁴

Types of anxiety disorders include generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social phobia and panic disorder. Anxiety disorder symptoms vary and can include:

- Psychological symptoms (frequent or excessive worry, specific fears or phobias, poor concentration);
- Physical symptoms (fatigue, sleeping difficulties, muscle tension, upset stomach and difficulty breathing); and
- Behavioural changes (procrastination, avoidance, indecision and social withdrawal).

Although there is a lack of recent Australian population data on the prevalence of anxiety disorders, a 2018 survey of over 15,000 of women aged over 18 found 46% of women reported being diagnosed with anxiety or depression.⁵

Worldwide, the rates of anxiety and other mental health conditions among adolescent girls are on the rise.⁶ In 2014, the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health found that 28% of women aged 18-23 reported a diagnosis of anxiety or depression.⁷

In Australia, studies and surveys on different cohorts return varying results. For example, a study of over 600 people who attended the 2016 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day found that 58% of lesbian, bisexual and queer women reported a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, depression or other mental health condition.⁸ The 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that 34% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reported being diagnosed with a mental health condition, including anxiety.⁹

Women’s higher likelihood of developing anxiety symptoms and related disorders are thought to arise from a combination of genetic, biological and socio-environmental factors.¹⁰

Addressing social factors such as exposure to poverty and violence, provides the greatest opportunity for anxiety prevention. For example, women who experience domestic violence are four times more likely to develop anxiety.¹¹ Low socioeconomic status is also associated with anxiety disorders.¹²

Anxiety can also impact physical health and vice versa. For example, women with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) report higher prevalence of anxiety symptoms than women without PCOS.¹³ A history of comorbid depression and anxiety is a predictor of new onset heart disease in middle-aged women.¹⁴ Sleeping difficulties have been found to precede the development of anxiety and depression in young women.¹⁵ Anxiety is also linked to increased disability levels in women with multiple sclerosis.¹⁶
The relationship between depression and anxiety is complex and varies from person to person. Half of those with depression also experience anxiety. The relationship may be biological, however there is no evidence that one causes the other, and each disorder has its own causes and symptoms.  

While anxiety disorders are often recurring and long term, they can be managed with ongoing help from health professionals. Talk therapies, particularly cognitive behavioural therapy with trained therapists, have been identified as effective in managing anxiety disorders. However women report that cost is a major barrier to accessing these treatments. Medications, including some antidepressants, are sometimes prescribed to treat severe anxiety symptoms. Self-help treatment and lifestyle changes are recommended to manage mild symptoms. Recent research recommends sex-specific treatment that considers the role of female reproductive hormones. Real and perceived stigma around anxiety can reduce the chance that those experiencing anxiety will seek help. However, a study by Beyond Blue found that the Australian population is more accepting of anxiety conditions than many believe.

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Overview

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List of supports

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beyondblue 1300 22 4636
Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation
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