

How Big a Problem is Anxiety?

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The chances are fairly high that either you or a loved one has had a history of anxiety. In any given year about 17% of us will have an anxiety disorder---and over our lives, about 28 % of us will have an anxiety disorder. And, if you have one anxiety disorder, then you probably have two or three anxiety disorders---and, possibly, depression. The most common anxiety disorders are panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and specific phobia. 49% of the general population has a history of anxiety, depression, [substance abuse](#) or some of all three major problems.

[Anxiety](#) disorders have effects on your health. People with panic disorder are more likely to have mitral valve prolapse, hypertension, peptic ulcer, diabetes, angina or thyroid disease. In fact, men who have anxiety disorders are also at greater risk for cardiac disorders, hypertension, gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory illness, asthma, and back pain. Women with anxiety disorders are more likely to have a history of cardiac problems, hypertension, metabolic, gastrointestinal, dermatological, respiratory disorders and arthritis.

And anxiety has been increasing. The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950's. We are getting more [anxious](#) every decade. Psychologists have speculated about the possible reasons for this increase in both anxiety and depression over the last fifty years. Some of the reasons may be a decrease in "social connectedness"---we tend to move more, change jobs, participate less in civic organizations, and we are less likely to participate in religious communities. People are far less likely to get married, more likely to delay getting married, and more likely to live alone. All of these factors can contribute to worry, uncertainty, anxiety and depression.

And our expectations have changed in the last fifty years. We expect to have a more affluent life-style, we are driven by unrealistic ideas of what we need ("I need the latest ipod!!!"), and we have unrealistic ideas about relationships and appearance. In the 1950's sociologists would write about "The Organization Man" who worked for the corporation for his or her entire career. Today many people would love to have a job that had that kind of stability. And our expectations about retirement also lead us to feel anxious. We now have to rely on our own savings---rather than a company pension plan---to help us survive during retirement.

And anxiety isn't helped by the fact that we have all the bad news all the time. Turn on your cable stations and you can immediately see the latest catastrophe---sometimes as it is actually happening in "real time". Bad news sells—and reminds us--- that we can all be in danger. Even though we live longer, have better health care, travel is safer, we are richer, and we have safer cars--- we now think that there is a disaster on the horizon. Because we are constantly bombarded with bad news, we think that we are in greater danger. We may not be in greater danger---but it's what we think that counts in the way we feel.

No wonder we are [nervous](#) wrecks.

In this blog, I hope to give you some understanding about the nature of anxiety and what you might do to help yourself.

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