



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
British Columbia  
*Mental health for all*

# ANXIETY AND PANIC



## Plainer language series

Anxiety is normal. Everyone feels anxiety at times.

Anxiety can help you. It warns you when you might be in danger. It can help you get away from danger.

## WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE?

Anxiety affects your thoughts, feelings in your body, and actions.

### 1. Thoughts—“what if...?”

Anxiety comes up when you think that something bad will happen.



Imagine that you have been invited to a party. You may feel anxious if you think no one will talk to you. You may worry that you will be all

alone. You may wonder if you should even go. But you may feel happy or excited if you know your friends will be at the party.

## **2. Feelings in your body—Getting ready to fight, run away, or freeze**

You can feel anxiety in your body. You may feel your heart beating faster. You may feel like you cannot breathe. You may feel hot and sweaty. You may feel shaky. You may have an upset stomach.



These sensations are signs that your body is getting ready to take action. They may not feel good, but they cannot hurt you.

### **3. Actions—Fighting, running away, or freezing**

You feel anxious when you feel threatened. These actions are the ways your body tries to protect you:

You may fight by acting out or talking back: “Hurry up! We are going to be late!”



You may run away to avoid something: “I do not think that anyone will talk to me, so I will not join my co-workers for lunch.”

We may get stuck or “freeze” and have a hard time thinking clearly: “I do not know what to do!”



### ***When is anxiety a problem?***

Anxiety is a normal reaction to a difficult problem or situation. Anxiety may not be a problem when it is manageable and matches the situation you are going through.

Anxiety can become a problem when it is hard to control. Anxiety problems can make people change the way they live their lives. Here are signs that anxiety may be a problem:

- You do not always know why you feel anxious.
- Other people in the same situation would not feel very anxious.
- You act differently to avoid feeling anxious. It is common for people to avoid things that bring up anxiety.
- You have a lot of fear or worries that get in the way of daily living.
- The anxiety stays with you, even after the stress is gone.

## **PANIC ATTACKS**

Panic attacks are bursts of very strong fear or anxiety. They start very suddenly, but they usually start to go away on their own in a few minutes. Here are the signs of a panic attack:

- Feeling like your heart is beating very quickly or loudly
- Feeling shaky or dizzy
- Feeling like you cannot breathe
- Sweating or feeling cold



- Feeling separated from things going on around you
- Feeling like you need to escape or run away
- Feeling like you may be dying

Panic attacks can be scary, but they cannot hurt you. Panic is normal when you are very scared. Many people have had a panic attack.





## WHEN TO FIND HELP

Anxiety is a problem when it comes up often or comes up a lot when you are not in danger. It is also a problem if it changes the way you live your life.

Panic attacks are a problem when they happen often. Some people become scared of having another panic attack.

You should talk to a doctor or a counsellor when:

- You feel a lot of anxiety you cannot control
- You have many panic attacks
- Anxiety or panic make it hard to get through the day
- You avoid places, people or tasks that might make you feel anxiety or panic
- You have physical signs like a sore stomach, headaches, or problems with sleep

Many different things cause feelings of anxiety or panic, even other health problems. It is important to talk to a doctor to see what is causing anxiety.

When someone has a lot of problems with anxiety or panic attacks, they may have an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are a group of mental illnesses that show up as anxiety or panic. Anxiety disorders are usually treated with psychotherapy, where you talk with a counsellor. Some medications can also help manage anxiety.



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## Where do I go from here?

You can learn more about anxiety from these resources:

### Anxiety Canada

Visit [anxietycanada.com](https://anxietycanada.com) for more information on anxiety and anxiety disorders. You can watch videos, listen to a podcast, find a group therapy course, or learn self-help tools to help you cope with anxiety at home.



## Wellness Modules

The Mood Disorders Association is for people who have depression and other mood problems. They have support groups and other programs to help people. The Mood Disorders Association has groups across BC. To find a group in your community, visit their website at [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net) or call 604-873-0103.

## BC Mental Health Support Line

This phone service can help you when you are worried, stressed or upset. They can help with a lot of other problems, too. They can help you find services in your community. You can also call if you just need to talk to someone. Call **310-6789** (do not add an area code) any time of day or night. You can talk to someone right away. Translators can help you in many different languages. Say the name of the language you need in English to get an interpreter

## BounceBack® program

BounceBack is for people dealing with low mood, stress, or anxiety. You learn skills in an online course. You can also talk with a trained worker called a “coach” on the phone. The program is free. Telephone coaches speak English, French, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Punjabi. Bounce Back is run by the Canadian Mental Health Association. Visit [www.bouncebackbc.ca](http://www.bouncebackbc.ca) for information on the BounceBack program.

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This booklet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association’s BC Division. It is based on current research and resources. We also check key facts with doctors and other mental health experts. Please contact us if you want to know what resources we used.

**Founded in 1918, CMHA is a national charity that helps maintain and improve mental health for all Canadians.**

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*Mental health for all*

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pour la santé mentale  
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*La santé mentale pour tous*



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