



Anxiety & depression

Your questions answered

If you're experiencing anxiety or depression, you're not alone. 1 in 4 Australians lives with anxiety.ⁱ And 1 in 7 Australians will experience depression.ⁱⁱ Many people with musculoskeletal conditions deal with some form of anxiety and/or depression due to their conditionⁱⁱⁱ.

It's important to recognise signs of depression and anxiety and seek help as early as possible. That way, you can develop a treatment plan with your doctor that fits your needs physically, emotionally and mentally.

Q. What is anxiety?

A. Anxiety is a normal feeling in response to stressful situations. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it begins to interfere with your everyday life. If this is happening to you, you may have an anxiety disorder.

There are different types of anxiety disorders with varying symptoms. Recognising the signs and symptoms is essential so you can manage it effectively.

Q. What are the symptoms?

A. Common symptoms of anxiety disorders include:

- shortness of breath
- rapid heartbeat
- feeling jittery and/or shaky
- tightness in the chest
- stomach pain and/or nausea
- poor memory or concentration
- obsessive thinking and/or worrying
- sleep problems, for example, not sleeping well or sleeping a lot
- panic or anxiety attacks
- feelings of impending doom
- abuse of drugs and/or alcohol.

Talk with your doctor if you're experiencing any of these symptoms. If your doctor finds that you do have an anxiety disorder, you can discuss the range of treatment options available and find the best treatments for you.



Q. What is depression?

A. Most people feel sad, lonely, or unhappy at times. They're common, normal feelings when something causes you emotional pain or stress.

However, some people experience these emotions frequently and intensely for prolonged periods. They lose interest and motivation in their lives and the world around them. These people may be depressed.

Depression is a serious condition affecting how you think, behave, feel, and live your life. This can affect your mental and physical health. The good news is that help and treatment for depression are available and effective.

Q. What are the symptoms?

A. You may be depressed if you're feeling sad, miserable or unhappy and have lost interest or pleasure in your life or activities for more than two weeks. You may also experience symptoms such as:

- feeling miserable, overwhelmed, anxious or empty for prolonged periods
- feeling hopeless or worthless
- feeling irritable, restless or frustrated
- feeling unmotivated, or a loss of interest in once pleasurable activities
- sleep problems
- not wanting to get out of bed
- feeling excessively tired and/or having low energy
- difficulty concentrating, making decisions and getting things done
- changes in appetite and body weight
- suicidal thoughts and tendencies (for example, being careless of your safety and wellbeing)
- abuse of drugs and alcohol
- physical pain such as headaches, cramps and digestive problems.

Q. What should I do if I think I have anxiety or depression?

A. It's healthy to feel a range of emotions, but if they impact your ability to function and feel happy or interested in life, you should discuss how you feel with someone you trust. It can be scary to take that first step, but it's important that you do so. Then you can start actively managing these feelings.

Make a long appointment with your doctor. Be honest about how you feel. They may ask you a series of questions to help identify or diagnose anxiety and/or depression and develop a [Mental Health Treatment Plan](#) (MHTP). This plan entitles you to Medicare rebates for certain mental health professionals and care. Whether you have an MHTP or not, you and your doctor should discuss your treatment options and agree on an appropriate plan.

Q. What are the treatments for anxiety and depression?

A. There are many different treatments available for anxiety and depression. Finding the right treatment and health professional that works for you is essential to effectively manage anxiety and depression.

Your treatment plan will fit your specific set of symptoms and needs. It may involve a combination of self-care and medical care.

Q. What medical care may be used to manage my anxiety or depression?

A. For mild anxiety, your doctor may recommend self-care and lifestyle changes. *We discuss these in more detail in the next section.*

However, if you have depression or more severe anxiety, you may also need medical care, including psychological therapies and medicines.



Psychological therapies – or talk therapies – explore the feelings, thoughts and behaviours that are distressing you, and work towards changing them. There are many psychological therapies, but one of the most commonly used is [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) or CBT.

CBT helps people learn to identify and change negative or unhelpful thoughts that have a harmful effect on behaviour and emotions, and replace them with more objective, realistic thoughts. People learn practical coping strategies such as goal setting and problem-solving that they can use in current and future situations.

Medicines. [Antidepressant](#) medicines can help ease some of the symptoms of anxiety and depression. They may be used along with psychological therapies and self-care. It may take some time to find the right medicine that works best for you, so stay in contact with your doctor to inform them about any side effects or if you feel the medicine isn't working.

Q. What can I do to control my symptoms?

A. You can do many things to reduce the impact of your symptoms.

Exercise and stay active. [Regular exercise](#) has been proven to reduce stress, anxiety and feelings of depression, boost self-esteem and improve sleep.^{iv} Choose an exercise you enjoy, and consider joining an exercise class or exercising with a friend.

Learn about anxiety and depression. This will help you understand what you're experiencing and why. It will also help you have greater control over what's happening to you.

Talk with a trusted family member or friend about what you're going through. This will provide emotional support and may help ease some of your anxiety or unhappiness. If there's no one you can trust and comfortably confide in, talk with your doctor about getting a referral to a [mental health professional](#).

Join a peer support group. Meeting people who know what you're going through and have similar conditions and experiences can be beneficial. For anxiety and/or depression groups or forums, visit the [Black Dog Institute](#), [Beyond Blue](#) or [Mental Health Foundation Australia](#).

Eat well. A healthy, well-balanced diet is vital for good health and energy. Research has also shown a link between healthy eating and mental health. People who eat a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains and fresh fish are up to 35 per cent less likely to experience depression, and those who eat a diet high in processed and nutritionally poor foods increase their risk of developing depression by up to 60 per cent^v. Talk with your doctor or dietitian for more information and advice.

Get good quality sleep. Poor sleep is closely linked to mental health problems such as [anxiety or depression](#). Not sleeping well can worsen your anxiety or depression. And having anxiety or depression can make it harder to sleep or may cause you to sleep more than is healthy. Not enough or too much sleep can affect your mood, energy levels, and ability to concentrate and get through the day.

If pain keeps you awake, talk with your doctor about altering the timing of pain relief medication, use a [heat or cold rub or pack](#) on sore joints, or do some [meditation](#) or [visualisation](#) exercises. If pain, anxiety or depression continues to affect your sleep, talk with your doctor.

Learn how to breathe properly from your diaphragm and not your chest. When you're anxious, you may begin to breathe too quickly (hyperventilate). This can lead to light-headedness and tingling fingers, increasing your anxiety. Focus on your breathing and try to slow it down. This [simple breathing exercise](#) can help.



Try a variety of relaxation techniques to find the ones that work for you. There are many ways to relax your mind and body, such as [progressive muscle relaxation](#), [guided imagery](#), [meditation](#) and [breathing exercises](#), [tai chi](#), colouring in, [listening to music](#), reading a book, or [going for a walk](#). Choose things that you enjoy, and that puts your mind at ease.

Ask for help. Family and friends can help support you physically and emotionally with the day-to-day ups and downs of living with a mental health condition and pain. This support can be practical, for example, picking up groceries, or going with you to see your doctor. And it can be emotional support, for example, listening to your concerns or keeping you company. Asking for help can be challenging for many of us, but it's worth it.

Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition and mental health. They include:

- Your doctor
- Psychologist or psychiatrist
- Mental health nurses
- Counsellor
- Dietitian
- Musculoskeletal Australia | msk.org.au | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

More to explore

- [Anxiety](#)
beyondblue
- [Anxiety and depression: Find the path that works for you](#)
NPS Medicinewise
- [Anxiety and depression linked to chronic pain](#)
Musculoskeletal Australia – webinar recording with Dr Jacqui Stanford, Health psychologist
- [Arthritis and depression: what you can do about it](#)
Versus Arthritis
- [Depression](#)
beyondblue
- [Head to Health](#)
Australian Government
- [Patient education: Depression in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)
UpToDate
- [Support for mental and emotional wellbeing](#)
Musculoskeletal Australia

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References

ⁱ [Anxiety](#).

Beyond Blue. Accessed 18 July 2023.

ⁱⁱ [Statistics](#).

Beyond Blue. Accessed 18 July 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ [When musculoskeletal conditions and mental disorders occur together](#)

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Accessed 18 July 2023.

^{iv} [Exercise and mental health](#)

Healthdirect. Accessed 18 July 2023.

^v [Co-benefits of a healthy lifestyle for mental wellbeing](#). State Government of Victoria.

Department of Health. Accessed 18 July 2023.

