

Stress . Anxiety . Panic Attack . Depression

What is the difference between stress, anxiety, panic attacks, and depression?

How do I know if I am feeling stress, anxiety, panic attacks, or depression?

What do I do if I am stressed, anxious, panic, or depressed?

To answer these questions, see the below information on stress, anxiety, panic attacks, and depression. If you think you are experiencing stress, anxiety, panic attacks, or depression, treatment is available and you should see your doctor.

Stress: The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH, 2020) defines stress as how the brain and body respond to any demand. Stress is also defined as an emotional strain due to disturbing circumstances. This can include traumatic events such as the impacts of COVID-19, emergency situations, daily responsibilities, complications at work or the loss of employment, financial concerns, negative changes such as divorce, performances at school, and more. Stress is generally a reaction to a short term trigger or threat. All stress is not bad however when one experiences difficulty sleeping, anger or irritability, or physical pain as a result of stress coping mechanisms may help. Long term stress can harm your health.

Managing stress (NIMH, 2020):

- 1) Recognize the signs of your body's response to stress, such as difficulty sleeping, increased alcohol and other substance use, being easily angered, feeling depressed, and having low energy.
- 2) Talk to your health care provider or a health professional. Start the conversation and get proper health care for existing or new health problems. Effective treatments can help if your stress is affecting your relationships or ability to work.
- 3) Get regular exercise. Just 30 minutes per day of walking can help boost your mood and improve your health.
- 4) Schedule regular times for relaxing activities which may include breathing exercises and other healthy living activities.

- 5) Set goals and priorities. Learn to say “no” to new tasks if you start to feel like you’re taking on too much.
- 6) Know that you are not alone. Keep in touch with people who can provide emotional support and practical help. To reduce stress, ask for help from friends, family, and community or religious organizations.

Anxiety: Everyone has occasional anxiety when faced with a challenging situation or problem. And, although anxiety and stress have similar features and some identical symptoms, unlike stress, anxiety can be a disorder defined by persistent, excessive worries that don’t go away even in the absence of a stressor. Anxiety disorders involve more than temporary worry or fear. For a person with an anxiety disorder, the anxiety does not go away and can get worse over time. The symptoms can interfere with daily activities such as job performance, school work, and relationships (NIMH, 2020).

Managing Anxiety Disorder:

- 1) Talk to your doctor
- 2) Anti-anxiety medications
- 3) Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches people different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to anxiety-producing and fearful objects and situations (NIMH, 2020).
- 4) Support Groups
- 5) Psychotherapy or Talk-therapy discussing specific things causes the anxiety.
- 6) Stress Management (see above tips for managing stress)

Panic Attacks: While anxiety generally follows a period of excessive worry, panic attacks can happen suddenly without an obvious trigger. While anxiety can last for long periods, panic attacks generally only last a few minutes. During a panic attack, fear can be overwhelming and one might experience symptoms including sweating, a rapid heartbeat, nausea, chest and/or stomach pains, and trouble breathing. Feelings of a loss of control or the fear of dying are commonly experienced during a panic attack.

Managing Panic Attacks:

Talk to your doctor

Take slow, deep breaths

Relaxation techniques such as relaxing your muscles, yoga, meditation

Reduce stressors

Limit alcohol or caffeine intake

Eat healthy and get 8 hours of sleep

See above for ways of managing anxiety disorder.

Depression: Depression and Anxiety share many of the same symptoms. Depression is a mood disorder that affects how one thinks, feels, and handles daily activities. According to the NIMH (2020), if you have been experiencing some of the following signs and symptoms most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from depression. Keep in mind that one who is depressed does not have to experience every symptom. Some individuals experience many symptoms while others may only experience a few symptoms.

- Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, or pessimism
- Irritability
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Moving or talking more slowly
- Feeling restless or having trouble sitting still
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Difficulty sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause and/or that do not ease even with treatment

Managing Depression:

- 1) Talk to your doctor
- 2) Depression can be treated with a variety of medications and therapies.
- 3) NIMH provides these tips for helping self or a loved one during treatment for depression:
- 4) Exercise.
- 5) Set realistic goals.
- 6) Try to spend time with other people and confide in a trusted friend or relative.
- 7) Do not to isolate yourself and let others help you.
- 8) Expect your mood to improve gradually, not immediately.
- 9) Postpone important decisions, such as getting married or divorced, or changing jobs until you feel better. Discuss decisions with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- 10) Continue to educate yourself about depression.

Resources:

Please visit the following websites for helpful tools and additional resources:

National Alliance on Mental Illness at www.nami.org

National Institute of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov

American Psychological Association at www.apa.org

Mental Health America “Take a Screen” free online Screening Tools at www.mhanational.org

Suicide Prevention Lifeline at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

References:

NIMH, 2020, at www.nimh.nih.gov

APA, 2020, at www.apa.org