



# Mental Health Awareness

# Recognizing Anxiety Symptoms

Anxiety is a common mental health condition that affects millions of people worldwide.

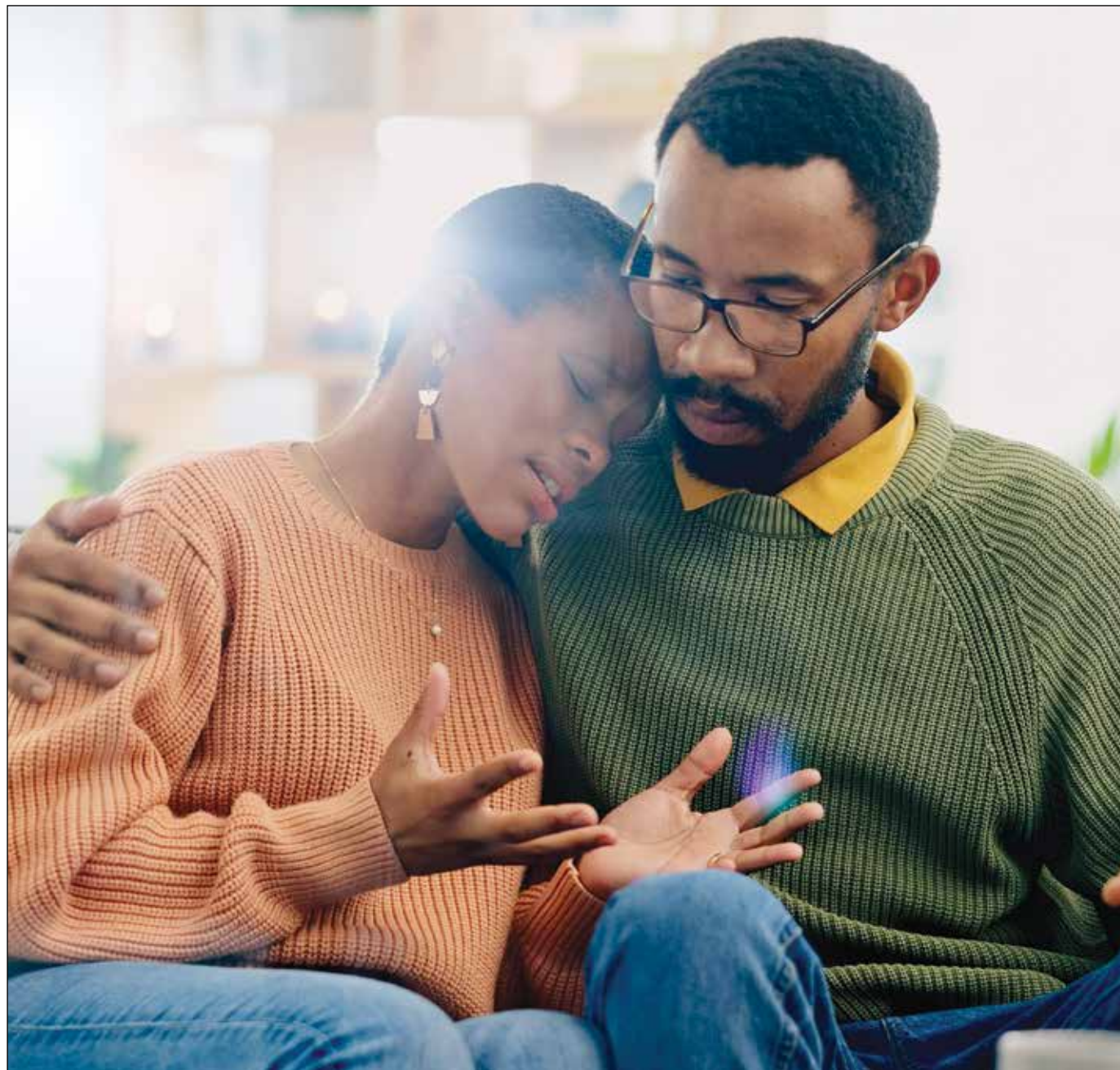
While it's normal to experience occasional feelings of worry or nervousness, persistent and excessive anxiety can interfere with daily life and overall well-being. Recognizing the symptoms of anxiety is the first step toward seeking support and managing the condition effectively.

## COMMON SYMPTOMS

One of the hallmark symptoms of anxiety is persistent worry or fear that is difficult to control. Individuals with anxiety may experience racing thoughts, anticipating the worst-case scenario in various situations, even when there is no imminent danger.

Physical symptoms are another key indicator of anxiety. These may include trembling, sweating, rapid heartbeat, dizziness and shortness of breath. In some cases, individuals may experience panic attacks, which are sudden episodes of intense fear or discomfort accompanied by physical symptoms like chest pain, palpitations and a feeling of impending doom.

Changes in behavior can signal the presence of anxiety. Some people may avoid certain situations or activities that trigger their anxiety, leading to social withdrawal or isolation.



© ADOBE STOCK

Others may engage in compulsive behaviors or rituals to alleviate their anxiety temporarily. Sleep disturbances, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, are also common among individuals with anxiety.

## OTHER SYMPTOMS

Some anxiety symptoms are less specific and may be easily confused with other conditions

or ignored altogether. Here are some less specific symptoms that are often linked with anxiety.

**Digestive issues.** Anxiety can often manifest in the gut, leading to symptoms such as stomachaches, diarrhea, constipation, nausea or even irritable bowel syndrome.

**Muscle pain and tension.** Chronic muscle tension and pain, such as tension head-

aches, jaw clenching and backaches, can be unexpected symptoms of anxiety. This tension often results from the body's physiological response to stress, with muscles tightening in preparation for a perceived threat. You might not even realize how tense you are until you start to feel pain from prolonged anxiety.

**Skin problems.** Anxiety can exacerbate certain skin condi-

tions or lead to new ones. Conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, acne and hives may flare up due to the body's inflammatory response.

**Changes in appetite.** While some individuals may experience a loss of appetite during periods of anxiety, others may find themselves turning to food for comfort, leading to emotional eating and weight gain.

**Sleep disturbances.** While difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep is a well-known symptom of anxiety, some individuals may experience less common sleep disturbances, such as nightmares, night sweats or sleepwalking.

**Cognitive symptoms.** Anxiety can affect cognitive functioning in unexpected ways, leading to symptoms such as memory problems, difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness, or feeling easily overwhelmed by everyday tasks.

**Increased sensitivity to stimuli.** Individuals with anxiety may become hypersensitive to sensory stimuli such as noise, light or touch, leading to irritability, agitation or feeling overwhelmed in environments that others find tolerable.

**Physical symptoms mimicking serious conditions.** Anxiety symptoms can mimic those of more serious medical conditions, leading individuals to worry about their health. Symptoms such as chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness or numbness and tingling in the extremities can be mistaken for heart attacks or other serious conditions.

# Ecotherapy for Mental Health

In recent years, a notable mental health trend gaining traction is ecotherapy, also known as nature therapy or green therapy.

This approach emphasizes the therapeutic benefits of connecting with nature to improve mental well-being and overall health.

## WHAT IT IS

Research published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* highlights the positive effects of spending time in nature on mental health outcomes. Exposure to natural environments has been associated with reduced levels of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as improved mood and cognitive function. Nature-based activities such as hiking, gardening and “forest bathing” have been shown to elicit calming and rejuvenating effects on the mind and body.

An article in *Frontiers in Psychology* calls ecotherapy a “free service” offered by nature. “While we do not pay for this service, its loss can result in a cost to humans resulting in slower recovery times, greater distress and reduced well-being,” the article reads.

Ecotherapy offers a holistic



© ADOBE STOCK

approach to mental health that integrates physical activity, mindfulness and environmental stewardship. Engaging in outdoor activities encourages movement and exercise, which are known to boost mood and alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety. Additionally, practicing mindfulness in natural settings fosters a sense of presence and connection with the environment, promoting relaxation and stress reduction.

## THE TREND

Ecotherapy interventions range from structured programs led by mental health professionals to self-guided practices that individuals can incorporate into their daily lives.

Community gardens, wilderness retreats and nature-based therapy sessions are examples of ecotherapy initiatives that provide opportunities for individuals to immerse themselves

in nature and reap its therapeutic benefits.

As ecotherapy gains recognition as a valuable adjunct to traditional mental health treatments, more healthcare providers are incorporating nature-based interventions into their practice.

Prescribing time in nature as part of a holistic treatment plan complements existing therapeutic modalities and empowers individuals to take

an active role in managing their mental health.

In conclusion, the growing trend of ecotherapy reflects a shift toward holistic approaches to mental health that recognize the healing power of nature.

By embracing nature as a source of solace, restoration and inspiration, individuals can cultivate resilience, promote well-being and enhance their overall quality of life.

# Mental Health in the Workplace

The modern workplace is not only a hub for productivity but also a space where mental health challenges can arise.

As individuals spend a significant portion of their lives at work, it's crucial to address and support mental well-being in this environment.

## CHALLENGES

**Stress.** One of the primary mental health challenges in the workplace is stress. The pressure to meet deadlines, perform well and navigate interpersonal dynamics can contribute to high levels of stress among employees. Mental Health America's 2023 Mind the Workplace survey showed that 81% of workers report workplace stress affects their mental health, and 73% said that workplace stress affects relationships with family, friends or co-workers. Persistent stress not only impacts individual well-being but also decreases productivity and increases absenteeism.

**Burnout.** Burnout is another prevalent issue in today's fast-paced work culture. Defined as emotional, mental and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged stress, burnout can result in feelings of cynicism, detachment from work and a sense of ineffectiveness. Left unaddressed, burnout can lead to decreased



© ADOBE STOCK

job satisfaction and increased turnover rates.

### **Anxiety and depression.**

Anxiety and depression also commonly manifest in the workplace. The competitive nature of many industries, coupled with long hours and demanding expectations, can exacerbate symptoms of these mental health conditions. Individuals may struggle with concentration, decision-making, and maintaining healthy work-life boundaries.

### **Bullying and harassment.**

Workplace bullying and

harassment can have severe implications for mental health. Toxic work environments characterized by harassment, discrimination or microaggressions can erode self-esteem, increase stress levels and contribute to anxiety and depression among employees.

## SOLUTIONS

Addressing mental health challenges in the workplace requires a multifaceted approach. Employers can promote a supportive work cul-

ture by implementing policies that prioritize employee well-being, such as flexible work arrangements, mental health resources and employee assistance programs.

Training managers to recognize and respond to signs of distress in their team members can foster a culture of openness and support.

Individuals can take proactive steps to protect their mental health at work by setting boundaries, practicing self-care and seeking support when needed. Open commu-

nication with supervisors or human resources about mental health concerns can help workers get accommodations and support.

Ultimately, creating a mentally healthy workplace benefits both employees and employers.

By acknowledging and addressing mental health challenges, organizations can foster a culture of inclusivity, resilience and productivity. Together, we can build workplaces where mental well-being is prioritized and supported.



© ADOBE STOCK

# Physical and Mental Health

The relationship between physical health and mental well-being is profound and bi-directional.

Numerous studies have highlighted the interconnectedness of these two aspects of health, emphasizing the importance of addressing both for overall wellness.

Research published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* has shown that regular exercise can have significant benefits for mental health. Physical activity releases endorphins — neurotransmitters that act as natural

mood lifters — reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety. Exercise also promotes better sleep quality, which is essential for maintaining optimal mental health.

A healthy diet plays a crucial role in supporting both physical and mental well-being. Nutrient-rich foods provide the building blocks for neurotransmitters that regulate mood and cognition. Studies published in the journal *Nutritional Neuroscience* have found that diets high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins are associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety.

Sleep is another cornerstone of both physical and mental health. Chronic

sleep deprivation can impair cognitive function, mood regulation and immune function, increasing the risk of mental health disorders. Conversely, prioritizing adequate sleep can enhance mood, cognitive performance and overall resilience to stress.

The gut-brain axis, a bi-directional communication network between the gastrointestinal system and the brain, further underscores the connection between physical health and mental well-being. Research published in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry* suggests that the gut microbiota play a crucial role in regulating mood and behavior, with disruptions in gut health linked

to an increased risk of mental health disorders.

Additionally, chronic medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and autoimmune disorders can impact mental health outcomes. Individuals living with these conditions may experience heightened stress, anxiety and depression, highlighting the importance of holistic care that addresses both physical and mental health needs.

The connection between physical health and mental well-being is undeniable. By prioritizing regular exercise, a balanced diet, adequate sleep and comprehensive health care, you can optimize your overall wellness.

# Prenatal Mental Health Care

While there has been much work done in the area of destigmatizing discussions around mental health care, pregnant women face unique challenges in accessing care.

Severe stress can even put the child at risk of schizophrenia later in life.

Raised maternal cortisol levels due to stress are associated with altered brain function in the child, according to the National Institutes for Health. Prenatal stress has been shown to increase the risk of emotional, behavioral and cognitive problems for the child. This includes increased risk of symptoms of anxiety and depression, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder and of being on the autism spectrum.

## BARRIERS TO CARE

A study by the NIH broke down the challenges women face, specifically in accessing prenatal mental health care, into six categories:

**Societal.** Culture, maternal norms and stigma.

**Political.** Immigration status, economic status, health care costs.

**Organizational-level factors.** Lack of services/overstretched services, collaboration within and across services, continuity



© ADOBE STOCK

of care.

**Interpersonal factors.** Relationship, rapport, language barriers, communication.

**Health care professional-related factors.** Health care providers being dismissive or nor-

malizing symptoms, HCP appearing too busy, women's perception of a provider's knowledge.

**Individual-related factors.** Beliefs about health services, beliefs about health care pro-

fessionals, beliefs about mental illness, deciding to seek help, fear of judgment, logistics, social and family life.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

Pregnant women can face

additional barriers to getting mental health care if they also fall into other sub-groups. Factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and disability intersect with gender to shape women's experiences with mental health. Addressing the unique needs of marginalized communities within the broader conversation is essential for ensuring inclusivity and equity.

## SOLUTIONS

The NIH study recommended many approaches for improving access to prenatal mental health care. They include improvement of mental health literacy, free access to woman-centered health care, communication and cultural training for doctors, improved funding for services, laws to protect those with immigration status, policies that support the funding and implementation of personalized culturally appropriate care and promote gender equality, higher paid parental leave, the right to access contraception and abortion, and international, culturally sensitive public mental health campaigns to increase knowledge about mental illness and improve attitudes about the issue.

By addressing the challenges pregnant women face in mental health and promoting open dialogue, support and advocacy, we can increase awareness, reduce stigma and foster a culture of holistic well-being for pregnant women everywhere.

# Supporting Loved Ones

Supporting a loved one with a mental illness can be challenging, but it's also incredibly important for their well-being and recovery.

Your support can make a significant difference in their journey toward healing.

One of the most crucial ways to support a loved one with a mental illness is to educate yourself about their condition. Understanding the symptoms, triggers, and treatment options can help you provide informed support and communicate effectively. Reliable sources such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness or the American Psychiatric Association offer valuable information and resources for both individuals with mental illness and their loved ones. Learn more about common mental health conditions at [bit.ly/3UCbe0d](https://bit.ly/3UCbe0d).

Effective communication is key in supporting someone with a mental illness.

Encourage open and honest conversations, and actively listen without judgment. Validate their feelings and experiences, and offer reassurance and empathy. Avoid minimizing or dismissing their struggles, and instead, express your willingness to support them in any way they need.



© ADOBE STOCK

Encouraging your loved one to seek professional help is essential for managing their mental health effectively. Offer to assist them in finding a therapist, psychiatrist or support group that meets their needs. Be patient and understanding, as seeking help can be daunting for many individuals with mental illness.

Prioritize self-care to maintain your own well-being while supporting a loved one with a mental illness. Set boundaries to protect your own mental and emotional health, and seek support from friends, family members or a therapist if needed. This can include setting limits on your availability. You might set

aside specific times when you're not available to provide support or assistance but instead focus on your own needs and interests.

Finally, celebrate their progress and victories, no matter how small. Recognize their resilience and courage in facing their challenges, and offer praise and encouragement

along the way. Your unwavering support can be a source of strength and hope for your loved one as they navigate their journey toward healing.

Supporting a loved one with a mental illness requires patience, empathy and understanding. You can make a meaningful difference in your loved one's recovery journey.

# Social Media and Mental Health

Social media has revolutionized the way we connect, communicate and consume information.

While these platforms offer numerous benefits, including staying in touch with friends and accessing a wealth of content, research suggests that excessive social media use can have significant implications for mental health.

## CHALLENGES

A study published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* found a link between social media use and increased feelings of loneliness and depression among young adults. The constant exposure to curated and often idealized representations of others' lives can lead to social comparison, where individuals perceive their own lives as inferior, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and isolation.

The addictive nature of social media platforms can also exacerbate mental health issues. A study published in the *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* found that excessive social media use is associated with symptoms of addiction, such as withdrawal, cravings and loss of control. This can interfere with daily activities, sleep patterns and overall well-being.

Cyberbullying is another concerning aspect of social



© ADOBE STOCK

media's impact on mental health. According to research from the Pew Research Center, nearly 60% of American teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying. The anonymity and reach of social media platforms make it easier for individuals to engage in bullying behavior, leading to psychological distress and even suicidal ideation among victims.

The constant influx of information and notifications on social media can contribute to heightened stress and anxiety levels. A study published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* found that individuals who frequently check social media report higher levels of stress compared to those who use these platforms less frequently. The pressure to maintain

an online persona, respond to messages promptly and keep up with the latest trends can be overwhelming.

## SOLUTIONS

Despite these challenges, there are steps individuals can take to mitigate the negative impact of social media on their mental health. Setting boundaries around social media use, engaging in offline

activities and curating a positive online environment by unfollowing accounts that trigger negative feelings can help promote a healthier relationship with social media.

By understanding the risks and implementing strategies to navigate the digital landscape mindfully, you can harness the power of social media while safeguarding your mental well-being.