

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY



Is it ok, normal, a natural part of everyday life and stress?

Whether you feel depressed or anxious because of bad news, a new diagnosis, deterioration of your/a loved ones condition or if you live with those feelings every day—there are people who can help you through it.

At MDNSW we understand that a diagnosis and living with a neuromuscular condition can trigger anxiety or depression. Many people experience difficulties dealing with their emotion and anxiety from the impact of living with MD. Often these feelings are not physiological symptoms of MD, they are a by product of living with the condition and any associated physical disability. The repercussions of losing muscle tissue and muscle weakness can include feelings of loneliness brought on by social isolation, fear of the future and mourning the loss of what you pictured the future might look like. In addition, some people are predisposed to mood disorders regardless of physical health.

As MD progresses, our members often tell us that they strive to know their own limitations and this uncertainty can lead to fear and anxiety. “Muscular dystrophy chips away at our physical abilities sometimes so slowly that we don’t even know what we were physically capable of until it’s gone. This can be a challenge to both our mental and emotional stability. I find myself anxious, despondent and dependent on any available helping hand.”

The experience of anxiety will vary from person to person, common symptoms include; difficulty concentrating, restlessness, avoidance behaviour, rapid heartbeat, trembling or shaking, feeling lightheaded or faint, numbness or tingling sensations, upset stomach or nausea & sweating.

Anxiety can become a problem when it is very intense, happens a lot of the time, feels overwhelming or it interferes with your daily living and your ability to cope. For many diagnosed with a neuromuscular condition, an essential phase in corralling any stressful thoughts and mental gremlins in one’s head is finding a realistic and positive perception of reality. That means accepting ones limitations, acknowledging the stresses that come with muscular dystrophy, working through the difficult times and then finding a perception of reality that fits.

“When I lost my ability to walk and moved to a wheelchair, I was pretty depressed. In time though I learned that my wheelchair opened a world of opportunities. Now, as long as there’s a ramp, I go wherever I want. It took me a while to see it, but my wheelchair gave me freedom”.

Where symptoms of anxiety occur frequently, occur over a period of time, and interfere with daily life, it is typically considered an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorders diagnosed in Australia.

There are a number of different types of anxiety disorders, including:

Generalised anxiety disorder - Spending most of your time worrying about a variety of everyday things that wouldn’t usually bother others. Worries seem out of control and you feel tense and nervous most of the time.

Social anxiety disorder - Experiencing intense anxiety in social situations because you’re terrified you’ll embarrass yourself or others will judge you. This often leads you to avoid social situations, such as talking in class, going to parties, being the centre of attention, meeting new people.

Specific phobias - Intense fear of a particular situation or object (like small spaces or spiders) that leads you to avoid the situation or object.

Panic Attacks - Can occur as part of any anxiety disorder, but not everyone with anxiety problems will experience them. Panic attacks are when you are suddenly overcome by strong fear and experience physical symptoms of anxiety, like a pounding heart, difficulty breathing, shaking, and feeling dizzy or feeling sick. Panic attacks are short (about 10 minutes) and usually feel frightening.

There is no cure for anxiety disorders but very effective treatment are available with a good evidence base. The treatments for anxiety disorders include medication like benzodiazepines or other general anti-depressants, atypical antipsychotics, as well as augmentative therapies. Several proven therapies can be effective like cognitive behaviour therapy, relaxation training, and prolonged exposure therapy. Yoga and meditation have also demonstrated benefits.

Tips to Manage Anxiety and Stress

When you’re feeling anxious or stressed, these strategies will help you cope:

- **Take a time-out.** Practice yoga, listen to music, meditate, get a massage, or learn relaxation techniques. Stepping back from the problem helps clear your head.
- **Eat well-balanced meals.** Do not skip any meals. Do keep healthful, energy-boosting snacks on hand.
- **Limit alcohol and caffeine** which can aggravate anxiety and trigger panic attacks.
- **Get enough sleep.** When stressed, your body needs additional sleep and rest.
- **If possible exercise daily** to help you feel good and maintain your health.
- **Practice relaxation,** take deep breaths.
- **Count to 10 slowly.** Repeat, and count to 20 if necessary.
- **Accept that you cannot control everything.**
- **Welcome humour.** A good laugh goes a long way.
- **Maintain a positive attitude.** Make an effort to replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
- **Get involved.** Volunteer or find another way to be active in your community, which creates a support network and gives you a break from everyday stress.
- **Learn what triggers your anxiety.** Is it work, family, school, or something else you can identify?
- **Talk to someone.** Tell friends and family you’re feeling overwhelmed, and let them know how they can help you.
- **Talk to your GP** who can provide an assessment of your psychological and physical symptoms. Your GP can provide you with treatment, referral to other specialist and allied health professionals. A treatment plan can be developed to assist you with you condition and a referral to a local counsellor can be arranged..
- **Contact MDNSW for support.** At MDNSW we can arrange a time to meet with you to talk and assist you. We can link you up to community support options and or our telephone counselling service. A referral to MDNSW can be made with a simple call from Mon - Friday between 9am - 5pm on 9809 2111.

The most important thing to remember is that you are not alone. Anxiety and depression are not inevitable or insurmountable — at MDNSW we have counsellors who can help you!

