

Anxiety



Black Mental
Wellness

The Mecca of Black Wellness



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There is a chance that you have experienced some level of anxiety at least once, even if it was only for a moment. For example, have you ever had to give a speech in front of a group or as a student in school? You know that nervous feeling right before the speech, “butterflies in your stomach,” sweaty palms, or constantly hoping that you don’t make a mistake or embarrass yourself? Those are all symptoms of anxiety. You may have also noticed that as soon as the speech was completed, the feelings started to disappear, and you were able to resume with your normal levels of functioning. For some people, those intense feelings, fears, uncontrollable thoughts, and physical symptoms (e.g., sweaty palms) are not temporary but constantly present. As a result, they become so overwhelmed and distressed that they are unable to successfully complete their daily activities. This is probably the manifestation of an Anxiety Disorder.

Anxiety Disorders are one of the most common mental health disorders in the United States¹. There are estimates which suggest that among adults, around 40 million have an Anxiety Disorder. In general, anxiety disorders are a group of conditions that each have a specific set of symptoms and characteristics, but they all share the common features of persistent and excessive fears or worries, in situations that are not threatening.

The Different Types of Anxiety Disorders Include²:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder** (Chronic, persistent worries)
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** (Recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors (compulsions))
- **Panic Disorder** (Panic attack: increased heart rate, feeling of fear or terror, chest pain, shortness of breath, sweaty/cold palms, etc.)
- **Phobias** (Fear of specific things/situations, that produce a strong negative reaction and/or irrational fear)
- **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder** (Anxiety symptoms that develop following stressful or traumatic life experience(s))
- **Social Anxiety Disorder** (Intense fears, worries, and/or fear of humiliation, related to social interactions)².

Common Symptoms of Anxiety

Each individual experiences anxiety differently. Review this list of common symptoms of anxiety and see if they describe your recent experiences. If you think that you may be experiencing anxiety, review the treatment options below.

- Overthinking
- Nervousness
- Muscle tension
- Trouble sleeping
- Increased heart rate
- Chest pains
- Restlessness/Feeling on edge
- Uncontrollable thoughts and/or worries
- Upset stomach/feeling of butterflies
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Trouble relaxing
- Easily annoyed or irritable
- Fear
- Feeling as if something bad will happen

Anxiety disorders are often underdiagnosed among Black/African Americans³ and it may often be due to anxiety disorders manifesting differently among Black/African Americans. Specifically, anxiety may present as a somatic or physical complaint which can lead to a visit to a primary care physician instead of a mental health professional. For example, research has suggested that Black/African Americans are more likely to report worries, hypervigilance, headaches, increased heart rate and high blood pressure⁴.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Relaxation techniques are strategies that help to produce a calming and more relaxed response. This is particularly helpful in managing anxiety as these strategies can help to reduce stress, fears, and worries, and elicit a state of calm and relaxation. Here are a few techniques to help get you started:
 - Meditation
 - Deep breathing (see Calming Breaths handout)
 - Yoga
 - Guided Visualization
- Create a Worry Journal to write out and release your worries and fears.
- Challenge your negative thoughts or irrational fears (e.g., “Where is the evidence?” “Is this true?”).
- Write out or recall a time in the past that you had a worry that didn’t turn out as you feared. Remind yourself that the worries/fears that you have currently, also may not turn out as you expect.
- Limit alcohol and caffeine intake.
- Call a friend or family member.
- Pray or engage in a spiritual practice.
- Take a walk or exercise class.

Reminder: You may not see improvements in your symptoms of anxiety immediately, but you may start to notice small changes over time. If you are still struggling with anxiety, here are some treatment options.

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR ANXIETY

Contact your primary care doctor or healthcare provider to discuss your current symptoms and treatment options for anxiety. This may include a referral for individual therapy (talk therapy or counseling) with a mental health professional and/or a referral to a psychiatrist for medication management.

Cognitive Behavioral Treatment (CBT) is a common type of therapy that is effective in treating a range of Anxiety Disorders. This treatment model focuses on the relationship between an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and addressing negative thinking patterns and/or behaviors, with the goal of improving and strengthening the emotional response and feelings⁵.

Exposure Therapy is a treatment model to help reduce fear and anxiety through gradual exposure to a feared situation or object. The premise is that over time, an individual learns to increase their tolerance of previously fear provoking situations or objects. This type of treatment is effective in treating obsessive-compulsive disorder and phobias⁶.

Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a type of treatment that focuses on strategies of acceptance and mindfulness (living in the moment, experiencing the present moment without judgment) and commitment and behavior change to cope with unwanted thoughts, feelings, and sensations⁶.

Medication to treat anxiety disorders can be prescribed through a psychiatrist or your primary care physician. The provider will assess your current and past symptoms to determine the best medication to prescribe. It is important to note that some individuals may need to try different types of medication, before finding one that is effective in reducing the symptoms of anxiety.

(1). National Institute of Mental Health. (2016, March). Anxiety Disorders. Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>.

(2) National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2017, December). Anxiety Disorders. Retrieved from <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders>

(3) Chasson, G. S., Williams, M. T., Davis, D. M., & Combs, J. Y. (2017). Missed diagnoses in African Americans with obsessive-compulsive disorder: the structured clinical interview for DSM-IV Axis I disorders (SCID-I). *BMC psychiatry*, 17(1), 258.

(4) Soto, José & Dawson-Andoh, Nana & Belue, Rhonda. (2010). The Relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Generalized Anxiety Disorder among African Americans, Afro Caribbeans and non-Hispanic Whites. *Journal of anxiety disorders*. 25. 258-65. 10.1016/j.janxdis.2010.09.011.

(5) Kaczurkin, A. N., & Foa, E. B. (2015). Cognitive-behavioral therapy for anxiety disorders: an update on the empirical evidence. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 17(3), 337–346.

(6) Anxiety and Depression Association of America. (201*). Therapy. Helpful Guide to Different Treatment Options. Retrieved from <https://adaa.org/finding-help/treatment/therapy>

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RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ANXIETY

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

https://www.aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Home.aspx

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

<https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety#>

Generalized Anxiety Disorder or GAD

<http://ourselvesblack.com/generalized-anxiety-disorder-or-gad/>

Soothe Your Nerves: The Black Woman's Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Anxiety, Panic, and Fear.

By: Angela Neal-Barnett

<http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Soothe-Your-Nerves/Angela-Neal-Barnett/9780743225380>

The Child Anxiety Network

<http://www.childanxiety.net/>

The Link Between Experiences of Racism and Stress and Anxiety for Black Americans: A Mindfulness and Acceptance-Based Coping Approach

<https://www.anxiety.org/black-americans-how-to-cope-with-anxiety-and-racism>

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