

Diabetes and anxiety

Anxiety is often a healthy response to a perceived threat. For most people, these feelings go away after the stressor has passed. For some people, the fear becomes so intense and long-lasting that it starts to impact on daily life, including work, school, relationships, and diabetes management. If you are feeling this way, you may have an anxiety disorder, but you are not alone. There are many things you can do to reduce your feelings of anxiety.



“There are definite issues that come up, especially around anxiety and low blood sugar. One of the symptoms is anxiety – that fight or flight response – so understanding whether you’re experiencing anxiety for psychological reasons or for physical glucose reasons is quite a difficult thing.”

Andrew, 59, person with diabetes

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is when a person experiences an excessive amount of fear in anticipation of something bad happening. Usually, this is a healthy response to a real threat. For example, certain situations, such as public speaking or having a hypo, can trigger anxious feelings.

Anxiety becomes a serious problem (a mental health condition, known as an ‘anxiety disorder’) when these feelings last for a long time (ie at least two weeks) and impact on daily life in a negative way.

Symptoms of anxiety include:

- » feeling nervous or on edge
- » being unable to stop worrying or control worrying thoughts
- » worrying too much about things
- » having trouble relaxing
- » being so restless that it’s hard to sit still
- » becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- » feeling afraid that something awful might happen.

Anxiety also has physical symptoms, including:

- » muscle tension
- » a racing heart
- » tightness in the chest
- » an upset stomach.

Helpline 1300 136 588

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If you have had any of these symptoms for at least two weeks, talk with your general practitioner (GP). They can make an assessment, offer treatment and/or refer you to a mental health professional.

It is important that you seek advice from a qualified health professional.

What has anxiety got to do with diabetes?

Anxiety is the most common mental health issue experienced by Australians. Among people with diabetes, some have anxiety before a diagnosis of diabetes, while for others, anxiety may be triggered by specific fears associated with managing diabetes (eg hypos, fear of developing complications). The link between anxiety and diabetes is not yet fully understood and researchers are studying this link.

What is clear is that anxiety can affect the way people manage their diabetes and, in turn, their physical health. Some examples include:

- » checking blood glucose levels continuously due to intense fears of hypos or developing complications
- » avoiding injecting in public, or not injecting at all, due to worry about what others might think.

“A few years ago I was really anxious, but it wasn’t just the diabetes. Diabetes was just one factor, but it was a focal point.”

Louise, 27, person with diabetes

Do you feel this way because of anxiety or diabetes?

Some of the symptoms of anxiety are very similar to the symptoms of low blood glucose (hypoglycaemia or hypo), such as trembling, sweating or a fast heart rate. This can make it difficult to know whether you are anxious, having a hypo or both. If you are not sure, always check your blood glucose, as this will help you to become aware of the reliable symptoms of a hypo.

Even if anxiety is not related to your diabetes, it can have negative effects on your health, life, and relationships.

What you can do

It is important that you seek help from your GP or another qualified health professional. They can help you to identify if you have an anxiety disorder and offer treatment or make a referral to a mental health professional if needed.

If you don’t have an anxiety disorder, your health professional can help you to understand what else might be causing the symptoms. They can give you the best advice.

Whether or not you are experiencing anxiety, it’s important to look after your emotional well-being.

Some of the following strategies may work for you – others may not, and that’s okay. They may give you ideas about other things you could try.



Reach out

Anxiety can make you feel like you are alone and may stop you going out. The people who care about you will want to support you.

- » Make a point of talking to at least one person every day.
- » If you don't feel like you have anyone to talk to, call a helpline, talk with your GP, or join a support group or an online community. You don't need to go through this alone.

Move your body

Physical activity has powerful effects on the brain and can improve the way you think and feel about yourself. Try to be active every day.

- » Yoga relaxes and calms both the body and the mind. There are many types of yoga and you don't have to be a yogi master to feel the benefits.
- » Try to get out and enjoy nature while you move, as this helps to reduce stress. For example, start with one short walk every second day, then gradually increase the time you spend walking and how often you walk.

Get enough sleep

Being tired makes it difficult to feel calm and relaxed. Try to have a sleep routine by going to bed and waking at the same times each day. The following tips might help:

- » Keep a sleep diary to help you understand some of your patterns.
- » Reduce your caffeine intake: limit your coffee, tea, and soft drinks, and don't drink them after 4pm.
- » Be active during the day but don't do strenuous physical activity right before bedtime.
- » Avoid napping during the day.

- » Remember, bed is for sleeping, so avoid watching TV, checking emails, or using your phone in bed.
- » Make sure the room is quiet and dark.

Don't try to mask it

It is common for people with anxiety problems to misuse alcohol, prescription medications, or illegal drugs. People adopt these behaviours as a way of coping, but they are just a temporary fix, and don't resolve the real problem. These ways of coping don't help in the long term, as people become dependent on them. This increases their anxiety and/or can cause other health or relationship problems.

Don't try to fight it

When we feel anxious, our initial reaction is often to tell ourselves to 'stop being ridiculous' or 'get over it'. Fighting against anxiety doesn't work, and may make it worse. You may have thoughts such as, 'What is happening to me?' or 'I'm having a heart attack ... or a hypo!' These thoughts increase your anxiety.

It's better to work with the symptoms of anxiety and let them be, rather than working against them. This doesn't mean you should resign yourself to it or like it. Acknowledge that it is there and that it is your body's way of telling you something is wrong. You could try:

- » **Observing** what it is you are feeling (eg fear, fast heart rate).
- » **Acknowledging** whatever it is that you are feeling by saying aloud or silently to yourself, 'I'm feeling ...'
- » **Thanking** your body for being such a great protector, and for doing such a thorough job at helping to keep you safe.
- » **Telling yourself**, 'This will pass'.

Breathe

Relaxation is a powerful way of reducing anxiety. Try a breathing relaxation exercise (see box). Find a quiet room for this activity and sit in an upright and comfortable position. The more you practise, the better you will become at naturally calming yourself during times of high anxiety. Once you've tried it a few times, you may be surprised by how helpful it is for improving your well-being. If this kind of thing isn't for you, that's okay, just skip it.



Talk with a professional

The strategies above may give you some ideas about how to prevent or reduce anxiety. However, they can't replace professional help. It's always a good idea to talk about your concerns with your GP or another qualified health professional.

Who can help?

Your diabetes health professionals

Your diabetes health professionals are there to help you with all aspects of your diabetes, including how you feel about it. If you feel comfortable, share your feelings with them – they will give you non-judgemental support and advice. You may want to talk with your:

- » general practitioner (GP)
- » endocrinologist
- » diabetes educator
- » nurse practitioner
- » dietitian.



Breathing relaxation exercise

1. Focus on your breathing. Take a deep breath in through your nose ... Hold ... Exhale through your mouth, as if you are blowing out a candle. Blow out all of the air.
2. Focus on slowing down your breathing into a calm rhythm. Exhale fully, releasing all the air.
3. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, repeat the following calming messages to yourself silently:
 - » I'm feeling anxious right now but I'm okay.
 - » I'm safe, even though I feel frightened.
 - » This feeling will pass and no harm will come to me.
4. If you are shaking or trembling, try to physically shake out the tension. Imagine that you are shaking water off your hands to dry them. Now stop, and notice how much more relaxed your hands feel.
5. Now relax the muscles in your body. Let all the muscles go limp. Then tense the muscles in your body – hold on really tight for a minute or so, without causing pain. Then release and let the muscles go limp again. Notice how relaxed your muscles feel.

Bring this leaflet along to your consultation to help get the conversation started. You will probably feel relieved after sharing your feelings, and it will help your health professional to understand how you are feeling.

Together, you can make plans to manage your anxiety.

A psychologist or psychiatrist

You might also like to talk with a psychologist or psychiatrist. These professionals are best placed to make a diagnosis and provide treatment for anxiety. Treatment may involve:

- » one-on-one counselling (eg cognitive behavioural therapy)
- » medication (eg anti-anxiety drugs)
- » a combination of psychological therapy and medication.

Ask your diabetes health professional if they know a psychologist or psychiatrist in your area who is familiar with diabetes, or:

- » find a psychologist near you by going to the Australian Psychological Society website at www.psychology.org.au/FaP
- » find a psychiatrist near you by going to the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists at www.ranzcp.org/Mental-health-advice/find-a-psychiatrist.aspx

You will need a referral from your GP to see a psychiatrist, but not to see a psychologist.

Your GP can tell you if you are eligible for a Mental Health Treatment Plan to reduce the costs involved in seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist.

More information and support

[beyondblue](http://beyondblue.org.au)

www.beyondblue.org.au or ph 1300 224 636

Information and support for people with depression or anxiety, or who are going through a tough time. Support services are available via telephone, email or chat, including online forums where you can connect with others.

[Lifeline](http://lifeline.org.au)

www.lifeline.org.au or ph 13 11 14

For 24-hour confidential telephone and online crisis support. People contact Lifeline for a range of reasons, including feelings of depression, stress, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts or attempts.

[Peer support](http://www.ndss.com.au)

www.ndss.com.au

(search for 'Publications & Resources')

To find out about what peer support is and how you can access it in your area, refer to the National Diabetes Services Scheme (NDSS) leaflet, *Peer support for diabetes*.

[Diabetes Australia & NDSS](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)

www.diabetesaustralia.com.au

www.ndss.com.au

Helpline 1300 136 588

Diabetes Australia offers a free national NDSS Helpline, through which people with diabetes and their carers can access diabetes information, education programs, peer support groups, and other events.

The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Helpline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

Developed in collaboration with The Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes, a partnership for better health between Diabetes Victoria and Deakin University.