

Subtle Signs of Anxiety

<https://www.heysigmund.com/subtle-signs-of-anxiety/>

1. The details. All of them. ASAP.

If you are someone who is more a go-with-the-flow type of person, an excessive need for details might seem confusing for you. For someone with anxiety, having as many details as soon as possible can be the greatest defence against anxiety sashaying in when it's not welcome. And it's never welcome. The details may help to cut down the 'what-ifs' that feed anxiety before they've had the chance to breathe. The need to clarify plans, or fill in or change some of the details isn't about needing to control anything, but about trying to stop anxiety controlling them.

2. Decisions. Ugh.

People with anxiety often have wonderfully strong and vibrant minds and when there's a decision to be made, they'll tend to think of all the different angles. On the plus side, they may be the ones to think of things that nobody else saw coming. On the other hand, anxiety can make decision-making more difficult. The outward signs of this may be trouble deciding, planning, weighing up consequences and organising thoughts in a logical, rational way to get to a good decision. The capacity to make a good decision is there, but anxiety can send it offline.

3. Avoiding new people, too many people, places, situations, the unfamiliar.

It's normal to want to avoid things sometimes, but if someone close to you regularly pulls out of things, looks for an out, says 'no' to invites, or changes plans, anxiety might be in the driver's seat. This isn't about avoiding situations, people or places (even though it looks that way), but about avoiding the awful feelings that rocket in with anxiety.

4. Flight. The need to leave – a place, a relationship, a situation, a crowd.

Anxiety drives people to make things safe. The two ways this can happen are fight or flight. 'Flight' can look like leaving, ignoring, not picking up the phone, wanting out of relationships, or wanting to leave a gathering early. This isn't done to hurt anyone and it isn't an avoidance of you, the people they care about, places or situations. It's an avoidance of the anxiety that might come bundled with those things in certain situations.

5. Or fight. Anger, aggression, tantrums, irritability.

Anxiety isn't always about avoidance or escape. During anxiety, the alternative to 'flight' is 'fight'. This can look like aggression or anger, but underlying it might be anxiety and the need to feel safe.

6. Tears. Unexpected ones.

When people are anxious, they might burst into tears, not because of sadness, but because of anxiety. The part of the brain that is involved in anxiety, the amygdala, is also involved in emotion. During anxiety it can be on high volume, so emotions can be too.

7. They might seem a little aloof, disinterested or indifferent. Except they're not.

People with anxiety can appear aloof to outsiders, but they're often the warmest people in the room. What looks like aloofness, is actually the process of standing back and taking things in until they feel comfortable and safe enough. There's nothing wrong with it and it isn't something that needs to be changed. Not everyone feels the need to open up straight away, and that's okay. It makes it all the more wonderful when the wall goes down.

8. There's a tendency to overgeneralise

People who are living with anxiety have a unique wiring that causes them to interpret things as harmful, even if they're not harmful at all. This is called '[overgeneralisation](#)'. In an evolutionary sense, this is a great thing – it's the reason people with anxiety are often alive to potential trouble long before it hits. The problem is that it can also cause too many false alarms. Rather than assessing the potential harm of things in the environment with fresh eyes every time, the anxious brain tends to tag everything as a potential threat.

9. Tummy trouble.

Where there is anxiety, there is often tummy trouble – constipation, diarrhoea, or irritable bowel. There's a good reason for this. In the gut are hundreds of millions of neurons. This is affectionately known as 'the brain in our gut' or our 'second brain'. They send information from the belly to the brain and they are a key player in mental health and emotional well-being. When the environment in the gut is out of balance, the messages sent back to the brain via the vagus nerve (the very long nerve that runs from the belly to the brain, touching the heart along the way) can stir anxiety. As well as neurons, the 100 trillion bacteria that call your gut home also play a major role in mental health. According to professor of physiology, psychiatry and behavioural sciences at UCLA, Emeran Mayer, gut bacteria contain extraordinary amounts of wisdom that get sent to the brain, influencing our behaviour and emotional well-being every minute of the day.

10. A need for reassurance.

Nothing can cast a healthy, vibrant mind into the future like anxiety can. Once the 'what-ifs' launch into action, it can make the need for reassurance a hungry one. The reassurance can be about anything – how you feel, how other people feel, whether the plans make sense, whether you'll get there on time. An anxious brain is geared towards noticing threat before it happens. Understand that even though your reassurance might be needed more than once, you're helping to soothe their anxiety back to small enough. We all need that sometimes.

11. Oh but it's not quite perfectly perfect.

The need for things to be exactly right can often be a well-built disguise for a fear of being criticized or judged if there is a mistake, fall or fail. To protect from failure, people with anxiety might place ridiculously high standards on themselves. They might redo things over and over and worry endlessly about getting the detail completely perfect. Sometimes it will be easier to never finish anything, or to have the excuse of falling short of time (because it was done over and over and over and ov...) than to claim full effort and for the result to not be good enough. On the plus side, when something makes it to completion, it's likely to be exceptional.

12. Worrying thoughts settle in.

When thoughts become persistent and unrelenting, there's a good chance they might be driven by anxiety. Often, there is an edge of irrationality or excessiveness to the thought. It's normal to worry sometimes, but when it influences behaviour (such as compulsive behaviours [checking, washing], constantly asking for reassurance), anxiety might be the pushy little beast behind it all. Worries can also take the shape of 'what ifs' and for someone with anxiety, those worries can start to feel like predictions. What if I make a mistake? What if I say something stupid? What if everybody has a dreadful time? What if this headache is a tumour? What if something bad happens to someone I love? ... You get the idea. Just keep in mind that the thoughts might feel irrational to you, but for your loved on, they can feel very real. Telling them to 'stop worrying' will work as well as telling someone to 'stop breathing'. Instead, acknowledge the worry and suggest putting a limit on whatever the safety behaviours are, whether it's checking, asking, washing. This is a way to show that you're on their team, and to help bring a sense of calm back to their world.

13. Rocketing to the worst case scenario.

An anxious mind tends to always on guard for possible danger. This can drive a tendency to leap to the worst case scenario in a single, almighty, bound. When this happens, people can come across as negative, but it's more about being careful and wanting to avoid trouble down the track.

14. Difficulty sleeping.

Anxiety loves showing up when there's nothing else to compete with it for air time. The early hours of the morning are prime time. We all shift between sleep cycles, but when sleep works as it should, we quickly put ourselves back to sleep again. If anxious thoughts find their way in, that gentle stirring can become a wide-eyed awakening that can persist for hours, breathing life into worrying thoughts along the way. A lack of sleep can make even the nicest of humans tense, irritable or cranky. Sometimes a bad sleep is just a bad sleep. And sometimes it's the work of an anxious mind.

15. Physical pain.

Anxiety can be physically painful. Even though anxiety does some of its best work in the head, it's a physiological response that can create painful symptoms. When the brain senses a threat

(real or imagined – it doesn't care) it activates the fight or flight response by surging the body with a chemical cocktail made up of hormones and adrenaline. This is a very normal, healthy response that happens in all of us from time to time. It's designed to ready the body to deal with the possible threat by making it faster, stronger, more powerful and more alert. When there is no need to run or fight, there is nothing to burn these chemicals that are surging through the body, so they build up. This creates the physical symptoms of anxiety, some of which can be painful. These can include a tightening around the chest, a racy heart, headaches, nausea, muscle tension, tummy aches, a dry mouth.

16. They seem forgetful, scattered, inattentive, distracted.

If someone seems forgetful, scattered, or inattentive, anxiety might be the culprit. We can all be a bit like this sometimes, but the clue lies in the regularity or intensity of the distractedness. Anxiety has a way of dominating head space with all sorts of thoughts and worries. This can skittle someone's focus and steer attention away from the present. Someone who is feeling anxious, might have trouble focusing on you or the conversation, despite the most heartfelt desire to be fully present with you.

17. Habits that seem unusual, or usual things done in an unusual way.

People sometimes develop habits as a way of self-soothing during times of anxiety. These habits might not always make sense when you're looking from the outside in, but they don't need to. The main thing to understand is that for whatever reason, they make anxiety feel smaller for a while. Anxiety-driven habits might include compulsive behaviours such as washing hands, checking locks, having to do things a certain number of times or in a particular order. They can also be physical, such as nail biting, pulling out hair (trichotillomania) and skin picking (dermatillomania). These symptoms will often escalate with the intensity of the anxiety.