

Anxiety glossary

Plain-language definitions of common anxiety and nervous system terms.

Definitions

- Panic attack: a sudden surge of fear and physical symptoms that peaks within ten minutes and ends on its own.
- Rumination: the mental loop of replaying the same thought, often about the past, without resolution.
- Intrusive thoughts: unwanted thoughts that arrive uninvited and feel out of character.
- Hypervigilance: a state of heightened scanning for threat, often present in anxiety and trauma.
- Derealization: a sense that the surroundings are not quite real, common during panic.
- Catastrophizing: the mind jumping to the worst-case interpretation of a small signal.
- Fight-or-flight response: the body's coordinated stress reaction, mediated by the sympathetic nervous system.
- Adrenaline: a hormone released during stress that raises heart rate and breathing rate.
- Cortisol: a slower stress hormone that follows a daily rhythm and rises with chronic stress.
- Reassurance seeking: repeatedly asking others, or searching online, to calm a worry.
- Avoidance: steering away from situations that trigger anxiety, which tends to maintain the fear.
- CBT: cognitive behavioral therapy, an evidence-based talk therapy that targets thought-behavior patterns.
- SSRI: selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, a first-line medication class for anxiety and depression.
- Exposure therapy: structured, gradual contact with feared situations to reduce avoidance.
- Burnout: a state of emotional and physical exhaustion driven by sustained demand without recovery.

The full glossary is at anxietyresource.org/glossary.

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