



SA Federation for  
Mental Health

## ANXIETY DISORDERS

### SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER

#### What it is:

Separation anxiety disorder is characterised by an excessive fear or worry relating to separation from home or attachment figures. This fear/worry goes beyond what one would expect given the individual's developmental age or level. Individuals with this disorder may refuse to go out on their own due to their separation fears, and they have a persistent fear of being alone or without their attachment figures. Children with this disorder may be unwilling to stay or go into a room on their own, and may follow a parent around the house. They will also typically request that someone stay with them until they fall asleep at bed time, and they may be unwilling to spend a night away from home.

Adults with this disorder may be uncomfortable traveling or spending a night somewhere on their own. Individuals with this disorder often worry about the death or wellbeing of their attachment figures, and may even have nightmares about losing these figures due to car accidents or some other tragedy.

#### Common symptoms:

1. Recurring fear or anxiety when anticipating or experiencing separation from home or attachment figures
2. Extreme fear and worry about losing attachment figures, for example due to an accident or serious illness
3. Reluctance or refusal to go outside of the home environment to work, school, etc. due to fear of separation
4. Fear and anxiety regarding being alone at home without an attachment figure being present
5. Refusal to sleep away from home or to go to sleep without an attachment figure being present
6. Recurring nightmares based on the theme of being separated from attachment figures, for example dreaming of losing your family in a car accident
7. Complaints of physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea or stomach-ache when separation is anticipated or occurs

**Remember to always consult a mental health or medical practitioner regarding any questions you may have about a mental health diagnosis and treatment options.**

This factsheet is based on information obtained from the DSM-5:  
American Psychiatric Association, 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.*



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### **Causes:**

Separation anxiety disorder often develops due to life stress, for example the death of a loved one, parental divorce or moving to a new environment. Parental overprotection may also be associated with this disorder. There may also be a genetic and physiological component, as research has shown separation anxiety disorder may be hereditary.

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