ADHD and Anxiety: When They Co-occur

ADHD and anxiety disorders are among the most common co-occurring conditions in both children and adults. Research suggests that approximately 50% of people with ADHD also have a diagnosed anxiety disorder — making this combination more the rule than the exception.

~50%
of people with ADHD also have an anxiety disorder
3x
higher risk of anxiety in people with ADHD vs general population
Both
conditions require treatment — not just one

Is It ADHD, Anxiety, or Both?

ADHD and anxiety share many overlapping symptoms. Both can cause difficulty concentrating, restlessness, sleep problems, avoidance of tasks, and irritability. However, the underlying cause is different:

Symptom	In ADHD	In Anxiety
Poor concentration	Mind wanders; attracted to more stimulating stimuli	Mind occupied with worry; catastrophic thinking
Avoidance	Difficulty initiating; boredom; low motivation	Fear of failure, judgement, or negative outcomes
Restlessness	Need for movement; sensory-seeking	Physical tension; nervous energy from worry

Symptom	In ADHD	In Anxiety
Forgetfulness	Inattention; working memory deficits	Usually not prominent (unless severe anxiety)
Sleep problems	Racing thoughts; delayed sleep phase	Worry-driven rumination at bedtime

Important: A comprehensive psychological assessment is the only reliable way to distinguish between ADHD, anxiety, and the combination of both. BNC's assessment process screens for both conditions as standard practice.

Why ADHD and Anxiety So Often Co-occur

- **Secondary anxiety:** Years of struggling with ADHD — missing deadlines, forgetting commitments, underperforming — creates a pattern of failure and shame that generates genuine anxiety. The anxiety is real, but it developed as a consequence of unmanaged ADHD.
- **Shared neurobiology:** Both conditions involve dysregulation of the same neurotransmitter systems (dopamine and norepinephrine).
- **Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD):** Intense emotional reactivity to perceived rejection or failure is common in ADHD and can be mistaken for social anxiety disorder.

How BNC Assesses and Treats ADHD with Anxiety

BNC's assessment process routinely screens for both ADHD and co-occurring anxiety. If both are identified, treatment is tailored to address both conditions simultaneously:

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** The most evidence-based approach for anxiety, adapted for ADHD presentations
- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):** Helps individuals develop a different relationship with anxious thoughts while building behavioural activation skills
- **ADHD-specific behavioural strategies:** Practical tools for organisation, task management and reducing the daily failures that fuel secondary anxiety

- **Nutritional assessment:** Some nutritional factors have been shown to affect both anxiety and ADHD symptoms
- **Medication coordination:** The presence of both ADHD and anxiety affects medication decisions — BNC liaises with prescribing doctors accordingly

Can you have both ADHD and anxiety? +
Yes. Approximately 50% of people with ADHD also have a diagnosable anxiety disorder. The two conditions share overlapping symptoms but different underlying causes. Both require treatment — addressing only one typically produces incomplete results.
How do I know if it's ADHD or anxiety causing my symptoms? +
The symptoms of ADHD and anxiety overlap significantly. A comprehensive psychological assessment is the only reliable way to distinguish between them, or to determine that both are present. Contact BNC to discuss an assessment.
Does treating ADHD help with anxiety? +
Often, yes — especially for secondary anxiety that has developed as a result of unmanaged ADHD. When ADHD is effectively treated and daily functioning improves, anxiety frequently reduces. However, if anxiety is also a primary condition, it typically needs direct treatment as well.

Concerned about ADHD and anxiety?

BNC assesses and treats both conditions using a multimodal approach. Contact us to discuss a comprehensive assessment for yourself or your child.

Call (03) 9848 9100

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