

A guide to managing anxiety

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we think we are under threat. Most people feel anxious sometimes. It is particularly common to experience some anxiety while coping with stressful events or changes, especially if they could have a big impact on your life.

Living with anxiety can be very difficult, but there are steps you can take that might help. Try our Quick Read (if you are in a hurry) or Detailed Read (if you have more time) for more information.

Anxiety can affect your mind and body, if you find that anxiety is affecting your ability to cope with day to day life you should contact your doctor or health practitioner for support and treatment.

If you are struggling to cope, we highly recommend that you seek professional advice. Please do not suffer in silence.

Quick read

- Talk to someone you trust. Having someone listen to you can help relieve feelings of anxiety. If you can not talk to someone you know, contact a charity or organization that offers a helpline or peer support group.
- Try to manage your worries. If you are suffering from anxiety it can be difficult to stop worrying about things that are on your mind. Try setting aside a time to think about your worries or, you could try writing them down.
- Look after yourself. Physical exercise, a balanced diet, time spent outdoors, and sleep can all help manage anxiety levels. <<Find out more about how to improve your sleep here>>.
- Breathe. Breathing exercises can help you relieve the physical and mental effects of anxiety. There are plenty of apps to help you, have a look online for the app that suits you.
- Keep a diary. Writing down what makes you feel anxious, as well as the things that are going well, can help you spot patterns and understand what triggers your anxiety.
- Try a complementary therapy – some people find that yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbal treatments or hypnotherapy help them to relax or to sleep better.

Detailed read

Anxiety and panic attacks

This resource explains anxiety and panic attacks, including possible causes and how you can access treatment and support. Includes tips for helping yourself, and guidance for friends and family.

What is anxiety?

What is the 'fight, flight or freeze' response?

Like all animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from danger. When we feel under threat our bodies react by releasing certain hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones:

- make us feel more alert, so we can act faster
- make our hearts beat faster, quickly sending blood to where it is needed most.

After we feel the threat has passed, our bodies release other hormones to help our muscles relax. This can sometimes cause us to shake.

This is commonly called the 'fight, flight or freeze' response – it is something that happens automatically in our bodies, and we have no control over it.

When is anxiety a mental health problem?

Anxiety can become a mental health problem if it impacts on your ability to live your life as fully as you want to. For example, it may be a problem for you if:

- your feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time
- your fears or worries are out of proportion to the situation
- you avoid situations that might cause you to feel anxious
- your worries feel very distressing or are hard to control
- you regularly experience symptoms of anxiety, which could include panic attacks
- you find it hard to go about your everyday life or do things you enjoy.

If your symptoms fit a particular set of medical criteria, then you might be diagnosed with a particular anxiety disorder. But it is also possible to experience problems with anxiety without having a specific diagnosis.

What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety feels different for everyone. You might experience some of the things listed below, and you might also have other experiences or difficulties that are not listed here.

Effects on your body

- a churning feeling in your stomach
- feeling light-headed or dizzy

- tingling in your fingers or toes
- feeling restless or unable to sit still
- headaches, backache or other aches and pains
- faster breathing
- a fast, thumping or irregular heartbeat
- sweating or hot flushes
- problems sleeping
- grinding your teeth, especially at night
- nausea (feeling sick)
- needing the toilet more or less often
- having panic attacks.

Effects on your mind

- feeling tense, nervous or unable to relax
- having a sense of dread, or fearing the worst
- feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down
- feeling like other people can see you are anxious and are looking at you
- feeling like you can not stop worrying, or that bad things will happen if you stop worrying
- worrying about anxiety itself, for example worrying about when panic attacks might happen
- wanting lots of reassurance from other people or worrying that people are angry or upset with you
- worrying that you are losing touch with reality
- Over-Thinking – thinking a lot about bad experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again
- depersonalization – feeling disconnected from your mind or body, or like you are watching someone else
- derealization – feeling disconnected from the world around you, or like the world is not real
- worrying a lot about things that might happen in the future
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Sometimes it might be difficult to work out whether your symptoms are totally related to anxiety or might be related to a different illness. If you are experiencing any physical symptoms it is best to talk to your doctor or health practitioner, so they can check out what may be causing them.

How else might anxiety affect my life?

Anxiety symptoms can last for a long time or come and go. You might find you have difficulty with day-to-day aspects of your life, including:

- looking after yourself
- Keeping your job
- forming or maintaining relationships
- trying new things
- simply enjoying your leisure time.

In some cases, anxiety can have a serious impact on your ability to work.

What is a panic attack?

Panic attacks are a type of fear response. They are an exaggeration of your body's normal response to danger, stress or excitement. This section has information about the following:

- What do panic attacks feel like?
- When might I have panic attacks?
- What helps to manage panic attacks?
- What is panic disorder?

"I can not sleep due to panic attacks and nightmares. When I fall asleep within an hour I am up, sweating, heart racing and shaking."

What do panic attacks feel like?

During a panic attack, physical symptoms can build up very quickly. These can include:

- a pounding or racing heartbeat
- feeling faint, dizzy or light-headed
- feeling very hot or very cold
- sweating, trembling or shaking
- nausea (feeling sick)
- pain in your chest or abdomen
- struggling to breathe or feeling like you are choking
- feeling like your legs are shaky or are turning to jelly
- feeling disconnected from your mind, body or surroundings

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that you are:

- losing control
- going to faint
- having a heart attack
- going to die.

You might find that you become scared of going out alone or to public places because you are worried about having another panic attack.

When might I have panic attacks?

Panic attacks can happen during the day or night. Some people have one panic attack then do not ever experience another, or you might find that you have them regularly, or several in a short space of time. You might notice that particular places, situations or activities seem to trigger panic attacks. For example, they might happen before a stressful appointment.

Most panic attacks last between 5–20 minutes. They can come on very quickly. Your symptoms will usually peak (be at their worst) within 10 minutes. You might also experience symptoms of a panic attack over a longer period of time. This could be because you are having a second panic attack, or you are experiencing other symptoms of anxiety.

What helps to manage panic attacks?

Panic attacks can be frightening, but there are things you can do to help yourself cope. It could help to keep/print these tips out and keep them somewhere easy to find.

During a panic attack:

- **Focus on your breathing.** It can help to concentrate on breathing slowly in and out while counting to five.
- **Stomp on the spot.** Some people find this helps control their breathing.

- **Focus on your senses.** For example, taste mint-flavored sweets or gum, or touch or cradle something soft.

After a panic attack:

- **Think about self-care.** It is important to pay attention to what your body needs after you have had a panic attack. For example, you might need to rest somewhere quietly, or eat or drink something.
- **Tell someone you trust.** If you feel able to, it could help to let someone know you have had a panic attack. It could be particularly helpful to mention how they might notice if you are having another one, and how you would like them to help you.

What causes anxiety?

No one knows exactly what causes anxiety problems, but there probably lots of factors involved. This section covers some things which make anxiety problems more likely to happen:

- past or childhood experiences
- your current life situation
- physical and mental health problems
- drugs and medication

Can anxiety problems be inherited genetically?

Research shows that having a close relative with anxiety problems increases your chances of experiencing anxiety problems yourself. But at the moment there is not enough evidence to show whether this is because we share some genetic factors that make us more vulnerable to developing anxiety, or because we learn particular ways of thinking and behaving from our parents and other family members as we grow up.

Past or childhood experiences

Difficult experiences in childhood, adolescence or adulthood are a common trigger for anxiety problems. Going through stress and trauma is likely to have a particularly big impact if it happens when you are very young. Experiences which can trigger anxiety problems include things like:

- physical or emotional abuse
- neglect
- losing a parent
- being bullied or being socially excluded.

Having parents who do not treat you warmly, are overprotective or are emotionally inconsistent can also be a factor.

Your current life situation

Current issues or problems in your life can also trigger anxiety. For example:

- exhaustion or a buildup of stress
- long working hours
- being out of work
- feeling under pressure while studying or in work

- having money problems
- homelessness or housing problems
- losing someone close to you
- feeling lonely or isolated
- being bullied, harassed or abused.

Physical or mental health problems

Other health problems can sometimes cause anxiety or might make it worse. For example:

- **Physical health problems**—living with a serious, ongoing or life-threatening physical health condition can sometimes trigger anxiety.
- **Other mental health problems** – it is also common to develop anxiety while living with other mental health problems, such as depression.

Drugs and medication

Anxiety can sometimes be a side effect of taking:

- some psychiatric medications
- some medications for physical health problems
- recreational drugs or alcohol.

How can I help myself?

Living with anxiety can be very difficult, but there are steps you can take that might help. This section has some suggestions for you to consider:

- Talk to someone you trust
- Try to manage your worries
- Look after your physical health
- Try breathing exercises
- Keep a diary
- Try peer support
- Complementary and alternative therapies

Talk to someone you trust

Talking to someone you trust about what is making you anxious could be a relief. It may be that just having someone listen to you and show they care can help in itself. If you are not able to open up to someone close to you, there are many charities and organizations that run helplines that you can call to talk to someone.

Try to manage your worries

It can be really hard to stop worrying when you have anxiety. You might have worries you can not control. Or you might feel like you need to keep worrying because it feels useful – or that bad things might happen if you stop.

It can be helpful to try different ways of addressing these worries. For example, you could:

- Set aside a specific time to focus on your worries – so you can reassure yourself you have not forgotten to think about them. Some people find it helps to set a timer.

- Write down your worries and keep them in a particular place – for example, you could write them in a notebook, or on pieces of paper you put in an envelope or jar.

Look after your physical health

- **Try to get enough sleep.** Sleep can give you the energy to cope with difficult feelings and experiences.
- **Think about your diet.** Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels.
- **Try to do some physical activity.** Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing.

Try breathing exercises

Breathing exercises can help you cope and feel more in control.

Keep a diary

It might help to make a note of what happens when you get anxious or have a panic attack. This could help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you or notice early signs that they are beginning to happen.

You could also make a note of what is going well. Living with anxiety can mean you think a lot about things that worry you or are hard to do. It is important to be kind to yourself and notice the good things too.

Try peer support

Peer support brings together people who have had similar experiences to support each other. Many people find it helps them to share ideas about how to stay well, connect with others and feel less alone. You could contact a specialist organization.

Complementary and alternative therapies

Yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbal treatments, and hypnotherapy are all types of complementary therapy that you could try and see if they work for you. Some people find that one or more of these methods can help them to relax or sleep better.

How can other people help?

This section is for friends and family who want to support someone who experiences anxiety or panic attacks.

It can be really difficult when someone you care about is experiencing anxiety problems or panic attacks, but there are things you can do to help.

Do not pressure them

Try not to put pressure on your friend or family member to do more than they feel comfortable with. It is really important to be patient, listen to their wishes and take things at a pace that feels okay for them.

It is understandable to want to help them face their fears or find practical solutions, but it can be very distressing for someone to feel they're being forced into situations before they feel ready. This could even make their anxiety worse. Try to remember that being unable to control their

worries is part of having anxiety, and they are not choosing how they feel.

Helping someone who is having a panic attack

It is understandable to feel frightened if someone you care about experiences a panic attack – especially if it seems to happen without warning. But it can help if you:

- try to stay calm
- gently let them know that you think they might be having a panic attack and that you are there for them
- encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply – it can help to count out loud, or ask them to watch while you gently raise your arm up and down
- encourage them to stamp their feet on the spot
- encourage them to sit somewhere quietly until they feel better.

You should never encourage someone to breathe into a paper bag during a panic attack. This is not recommended, and it might not be safe.

Try to understand

- **Find out as much as you can about anxiety.** This will help you understand what they are going through. Reading personal experiences can help too.
- **Ask about their experience.** You could ask them how anxiety affects their day-to-day life, and what makes it better or worse. Listening to their experience could help you to empathize with how they feel.

Ask how you can help

Your friend and family member may already know how you can support them – for example, it might help to take them out of the situation, talk to them calmly or do breathing exercises with them.

By asking them what they need or how you can help, you can support them to feel more in control themselves. Knowing that there is someone around who knows what to do if they start to feel frightened or panicked could help them feel safer and calmer.

Look after yourself

It can sometimes be really challenging to support someone with a mental health problem – you are not alone if you feel overwhelmed at times. It is important to remember to look after your own mental health too, so you have the energy, time and distance you need to be able to help.

For example:

- **Set boundaries and do not take too much on.** If you become unwell yourself, you will not be able to offer as much support. It is also important to decide what your limits are and how much you feel able to help.
- **Share your caring role with others, if you can.** It is often easier to support someone if you are not doing it alone.
- **Talk to others about how you are feeling.** You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you are supporting but talking about your own feelings with someone you trust can help you feel supported too.