



**University
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NHS Foundation Trust

Staff Psychological Support Service

Managing Anxiety

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What does anxiety feel like?

Before we explore 'anxiety' let's briefly discuss the difference between fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety are interrelated. When faced with fear, people will generally experience the physical symptoms relating to anxiety. Fear causes anxiety, and anxiety causes fear.

Understanding anxiety is the first step towards learning how to cope with it. Anxiety is a natural survival response that prepares you (mind and body) to react quickly when in danger. This is referred to as the 'fight, flight, freeze' response (autonomic response). Changes occur to your body during this response. Stress hormones such as adrenaline are released into the bloodstream, affecting your organs. You breathe more rapidly, and your heart rate increases to supply oxygen and blood to your muscles. These become tense to enable you to run away or fight. Simultaneously you sweat to help you cool down.

Historically, the 'fight, flight, freeze' response was useful in our early history when hunting or facing predators, and it is still useful when in danger, helping you to move out of the path of an approaching car or react quickly when a child is about to be hurt, for example. However, anxiety could be triggered by situations in which you don't need a 'quick' response, such as:

- Death of a loved one / funeral
- Divorce or separation
- Major health changes in yourself or loved one, carer
- Hospitalisation
- Getting married
- Having a baby
- Change in finances or work situation
- Moving or home renovation work

- Holidays and family get-togethers

What are the symptoms?

- Heart racing (irregular heartbeat, sometimes palpitations)
- Fast breathing (hyperventilation)
- Feeling sick (nauseous, vomiting)
- Shaking (tremors)
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Feeling dizzy, light-headed
- Headache
- Tense muscles
- Pins and needles
- Loss of appetite
- Churning in your stomach
- Needing the toilet more / less often

What causes anxiety?

Childhood experiences, past events, current life situation, mental health issues, drugs and medication and physical health problems. Anxiety can be seen as conscious or unconscious feelings of being unable to control or predict outcomes.

Self-care for anxiety

Relaxation can calm the mind and body, making you feel less anxious. Having a warm bath or gentle swim, going to the cinema alone or with friends or reading a book are simple ways to relax. You can take up a hobby such as drawing, painting, model-making, fishing, singing or playing a musical instrument. Exercises such as cycling, swimming, or walking

can help reduce anxiety. Some people find controlled breathing makes them feel more relaxed, especially if anxiety makes them feel light-headed. However, controlled breathing isn't for everyone - some people find it uncomfortable (use self-guidance). Controlled breathing involves trying to breathe in a rhythmic way. Yoga breathing techniques, such as breathing in for a count of 4 seconds, holding the breath for 7 seconds, breathing out for 8 seconds in a slow manner may also help with relaxation. Most people take shallow breaths, but try to breathe in from the diaphragm, just below the lungs, to get as much air as possible into your lungs.

Body Scan

Another technique involves relaxing your muscles to reduce tension. The technique involves tensing then relaxing different groups of muscles. Start by finding a comfortable sitting or lying position in a quiet place and concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes. One at a time, tense a group of muscles for 5 seconds, then relax them for 5 seconds before moving on to the next group of muscles. Start from the head and work your way down or at the toes and work up. Muscle groups and suggestions for tensing them include:

Head - squeeze your eyes closed, screw up your nose, clench your teeth, pucker your mouth and/or frown

Shoulders - lift them up towards your ears as if shrugging and rotate them backwards and forward

Arms - tense them as if you were about to lift something heavy, making fists with your fingers and then flexing them

Torso - squeeze your stomach muscles as well as your pelvic floor muscles

Legs and buttocks - squeeze your muscles as if you wanted to stand up and point and flex your toes

After you've worked your way through each muscle group, relax for a few minutes, concentrating on your breathing, then slowly count to five and come back.

Managing anxiety is important for you

Anxiety is something that everyone experiences, it is the body's way of telling us that something needs to be addressed. So, learning how to cope with its effects is something that everyone needs to master for their own physical and psychological wellbeing. Those who don't learn and use appropriate anxiety management techniques can experience a variety of negative effects, including physical illness, psychological illness, damaged personal relationships, and poor work performance.

Panic Attacks

A panic attack is a feeling of sudden and intense anxiety. You may have physical symptoms, including shaking, feeling disorientated, nausea, rapid, irregular heartbeats, dry mouth, breathlessness, sweating and dizziness. The symptoms of a panic attack are not dangerous but can be very frightening. They can make you feel as though you are having a heart attack, or that you are going to collapse or even die. Most panic attacks last somewhere from five minutes to half an hour. We may feel shocked and frozen, deskilled, and unable to cope during a panic attack.

Helping a person to cope with a panic attack

If the person is sitting down (encourage them to sit if they're standing) kneel on the floor in front of them:

- Using a gentle voice, reassure them they're not alone, and that you are there with them
- Encourage the person to make eye contact with you, or to look at your face
- Start breathing gently and regularly in through your nose and out through your mouth, roughly 5 beats each. Aim for a gentle rhythm
- Keep slowing the breaths down until the person feels calm
- Say to the person 'Breathe with me. Breathe like I'm breathing' and keep encouraging the person to copy the slow breathing
- The person might feel nauseous, lightheaded, or very tired afterwards. If they feel faint, encourage them to put their feet up and rest for a moment

Look after yourself - panic attacks can be exhausting