



talking about
anxiety disorders

introduction

We are all used to feeling anxious from time to time. When we are facing a job interview, or the possibility of redundancy, or awaiting the results of an important medical test, we can feel worried about what might happen and perhaps tense and anxious about how we will be affected.

We may think about things that are worrying us all the time and find it hard to concentrate on anything else. The strain can show itself in different ways. We may have difficulty sleeping or lose interest in food as a result.

Often the fact that we are under pressure spurs us on to do our best and to rise to the occasion. In most cases, the tension will go away once the stressful situation is over.

However, some people experience such strong feelings of anxiety that they are unable to cope with their day-to-day life. Often the cause is a clear problem but sometimes, for no clear reason, we become deeply troubled. We can feel highly anxious and it can last for days or weeks, or even longer. Anxiety affects us all but becomes a problem when we can't relax at times when we should be able to; when it appears for no clear reason; when we can't switch off the worry no matter how hard we try; when our lives start to centre round anxiety (for example when we avoid going places or doing things due to fear of what might happen). It is normal to worry – we all do it, but when we start to worry about worry it is time to try to sort it out.

This booklet is written for people who are experiencing this sort of anxiety, and for their family and friends. It sets out to provide some basic information about anxiety disorders and suggests some sources for further help including references to other reading material and to organisations. The internet is a useful resource for people needing help for their (or someone else's) anxiety and a selection of useful websites has been included.

what is anxiety?

Anxiety is remarkably common. Men and women of all ages and from all backgrounds can be affected by it. There are several different aspects to anxiety.

We can have anxious thoughts that cause us to have worries and fears, where we go over things again and again in our mind in a way that does not actually help resolve it. It can begin to link in with panicky thoughts and fears that something catastrophic and deeply threatening is happening right now. We feel sure we will faint or collapse, suffocate, have a stroke or a heart attack, or perhaps do something very embarrassing.

Our feelings and emotions can become altered with anxiety too, ranging from milder feelings of emotional tension through to worry and anxiety, to very high states of panic that occur during panic attacks.

Physical symptoms that occur with anxiety can include milder levels of tension like muscle tension, tiredness, pain, a slight jittery feeling, disrupted sleeping patterns, and hot and/or cold sweats. As the symptoms of anxiety increase and move towards panic, a full fight or flight adrenaline response occurs. In normal times, our minds and bodies have built ways of protecting us and saving us in times of threat. For example, when we step out into the road and a car hoots at us, we jump back on the pavement and notice that our hearts are racing, and we are sweaty, clammy, and shaky or our muscles are taut. We may feel on edge, breath faster and feel hot. Those reactions are all part of the standard fight or flight adrenaline response. Adrenaline helps prepare our bodies either to run away or to be poised and

ready to react. Such physical responses can save our lives in threatening circumstances and once the threat has passed we are usually able to carry on with our lives as normal.

So, anxiety is a common human reaction to a stressful situation or event. It can be a positive thing and if we did not experience a certain amount of anxiety, we would find it difficult to keep going.

Some of us, however, experience very high levels of anxiety and such strong feelings of distress that we are unable to manage everyday tasks as usual. We may find we are so anxious and edgy that we avoid situations we would usually cope with and even enjoy. It is as if we are always living on a knife-edge and the feelings of fear can seem unbearable.

Each person will experience anxiety in his or her own particular way, but there are a number of symptoms people often describe.

- Tense muscles can cause headaches or pain in the neck, shoulders or back.
- A dry mouth can make it hard to swallow.
- We may get breathless and dizzy, or feel faint from breathing more rapidly.
- We may experience indigestion, butterflies, constipation or diarrhoea because adrenaline causes blood to be taken away from the digestion to the heart and muscles.
- Our heart may beat alarmingly quickly.

- We may experience panic as the fight or flight adrenaline response occurs.
- We may find it hard to concentrate on anything and become very irritable with other people.
- We may feel weepy and emotional, thinking may become negative.
- We may experience difficulties sleeping and as a result we end up exhausted.

"I felt paralysed by worry. Unable to do anything. Unable to imagine things ever changing. It really began to pull me down."

Anxiety can also cause us to have feelings of depression, fear, terror and hopelessness. Our world becomes more and more restricted, and it can be hard to see a way out.

If this applies to you, or someone you know, you may wish to read the separate booklet on depression (see *Talking about Depression*).

"I could never relax, I was tense and wound up all the time. It was hard to focus on anything else. I felt really shaky and on edge."

Some people may be anxious about the future, perhaps because someone close to them is ill, or because of financial problems, or perhaps because the children are leaving home. Some people may be anxious about their past.

We tend to think that anxiety comes from being too busy and pressured, but it can be just as difficult to cope when we are in a situation where we do not have enough to do.

Being unemployed or in a boring job which we don't enjoy, for example, can make us frustrated and anxious and we can find ourselves at a low ebb.

The key factor of anxiety is that it has an impact on how we are able to live our lives. Some days are better than others – it can come and go often for no obvious reason. When we have anxious fears, we tend to avoid doing things we perceive or judge as being scary or anxiety provoking. So we will avoid conversations or meeting people if we are anxious in these situations. We will avoid going to shops if we have panic attacks in shops or on buses, and put off tackling difficulties and challenges at work and at home.

This results not only in our avoiding of situations but also potentially in our turning to others to sort out our problems. Anxiety can make us become dependent on other people and look to them to provide answers for us. The problem with this is that although it might make us feel better in the short-term, in the long-term it can undermine our confidence still further.

It can be very hard to explain how we feel to other people. Our worries may seem unreasonable and we may feel under pressure to put on a brave face and behave as other people expect. This worry about how others may judge us adds to our distress and makes us even more tense.

We may try using caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to help us get by. This may make us feel less anxious for a time, but in the longer term it can make the anxiety worse and impact on our health.

"You can lose so much. For years I cut myself off from friends and neighbours. I didn't go out."

circle. We worry about what is happening to us, and become more anxious and distressed.

"It would've been easier if I'd had my leg in a plaster. Then people would've known I wasn't right. But they just couldn't understand what was wrong with me."

There can also be a physical impact of anxiety. Our body's resistance to infection can become weakened and we're more likely to experience ill health. It can become a vicious

The most difficult step can be to accept there is a problem and to seek help with it.

There are different types of anxiety disorder:

for much of the time. We turn worrying thoughts over and over in our minds, but in a way that does not solve them. We worry about what we have done, or not done,

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), where we feel worried

"I wish somebody had sat down with me years ago and told me, you don't have to be like this. I didn't know other people had been through it too."

about what might happen in the future or what has happened in the past. This worry is associated with anxious feelings, and physical changes such as tension, tiredness, and poor sleep. We may go off our food, and feel on edge, jittery, irritable or tired. We may become easily upset and tears will not be far away.

Panic disorder. A person with a panic disorder has panic attacks and is afraid that a panic attack might occur for no clear reason. Panic disorder can become very disabling as sufferers avoid situations where previous panic attacks have occurred maybe even becoming housebound.

Panic attack. During a panic attack symptoms of anxiety rise quickly to a peak, and these are associated with feelings of terror and fear of catastrophe – that something really terrible will occur. You might have a fear of collapse, of fainting or suffocating, of having a heart attack, stroke or of dying or a vague sense of dread. Sometimes the person fears that a terrible mental event will occur, for example, losing control. More often however panic attacks occur during generalised anxiety, depression, drink problems and virtually any other mental disorder. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop a panic disorder. Many people have only one episode.

No one forgets their first panic attack – they fill you with terror and you find yourself fearing having another. Indeed, you may centre your life around trying to avoid having one.

Phobic disorders. A person with a phobia avoids or restricts activities because of fear. This fear appears persistent, excessive and unreasonable and is of specific things like heights, spiders or busy places. It can lead to an increasingly restricted life and an undermining of confidence.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Sometimes a person's anxiety leads to their feeling they must carry out certain actions again and again. This obsessive-compulsive behaviour might involve repeatedly checking that the door is locked, or endlessly cleaning the house. Many people can identify with this sort of behaviour – going back to check that the gas is switched off for example – however for people with OCD no matter how often we repeat the same behaviour, it never seems to quell the anxiety within us and we begin again.

The same can apply to ideas or thoughts, which go round and round in our heads, tormenting us and never giving us a moment's peace. The disturbing, persistent thoughts or images are called obsessions. Compulsions are the rituals formed to try and prevent or get rid of them.

understanding the causes of anxiety

Most of us feel anxious for clear reasons such as facing life stresses and hassles. It is not always possible to say what causes someone to develop anxiety. It may be an event like childbirth, an illness, bereavement or being made redundant that triggers it. It could follow on from a major upheaval like moving house. Even when it is something we've chosen to do, it can create a lot of worry and disruption in our lives.

On other occasions, we may have experienced a gradual build-up of pressure in our lives which makes us particularly vulnerable. Things may not be going well at work or in an important relationship. We may be trying to juggle many different demands on us and satisfy them all. This is particularly the case for women who are working and at the same time trying to provide care for their children.

It is not only recent events which can contribute to anxiety. Memories of things that happened in our past that worry or upset us can continue to affect us later. We still have the feelings of fear and distress, although we cannot identify what led us to feel this way.

"I just couldn't switch off. I used to just worry and worry even about silly little things. It was like I'd no space in my head to think of anything else."

Often, too, we become set in a way of looking at the world which confirms our worst fears and can feed our anxieties. The horrors we see on the news may convince us further that we are quite right to feel frightened. If things go wrong in our own lives, this only confirms our worst expectations and reinforces our anxiety.

There is an increased risk of experiencing anxiety for those whose parents or close relatives have anxiety. However, that does not mean automatically that we will have the symptoms.

Some medical conditions can cause symptoms of anxiety or panic. Usually our doctor or healthcare practitioner will ask additional questions to help identify the problem, which may stem from the thyroid gland, diabetes or other medication.

In high doses caffeine produces effects similar to anxiety, disrupts sleep and can make panic attacks more likely. People who experience anxiety should reduce their daily intake to 300mg or less (about four cups of strong coffee).

Energy drinks (for example, Red Bull) and tablets (ProPlus) contain caffeine and may be best avoided altogether.

Illegal drugs such as cocaine and amphetamines may also cause strong feelings of tension and anxiety. Although alcohol can act quickly to relieve feelings of anxiety, long-term alcohol misuse often increases anxiety levels. This can lead people into a destructive cycle of increasing alcohol use.

what you can do

“Before, I didn’t realise I had any choices. I found I had to work out for myself what my limitations were. What’s important now is that I’m in control of getting myself right.”

Anxiety can make it hard for us to cope with day-to-day demands. We may become isolated from other people, we may feel very frightened at what is happening to us, yet don’t know how to change. It can be very draining to be so tense and fraught all the time.

More will be said later about getting help from other people, but there are steps we can take ourselves to reduce our anxiety. There are no magic pills or cures for anxiety, you will have to work hard at this day after day. It may be

“I needed space to put all my energy into getting better first. Then I was able to look at why it happened. Not to blame anybody, but so I could stop it happening again.”

that whatever action we take will make us more anxious to begin with. This should decrease with time, but in the early stages we may find that we need to use support from other people to help us keep up our own efforts.

What helps may be different for each of us, but other people have said they found these things useful:

- Read self-help material for information and skills on how to address anxiety.
- Try to concentrate on the 'here and now' and not concern yourself too much with 'what if...'
- When you find someone you can talk to about how you feel try to avoid the danger of becoming too dependent on them or looking for them to solve problems for you.
- Work out whether there are any specific situations you find particularly alarming. Set yourself targets so that you can gradually work at facing these situations and getting the better of them in a planned step-by-step way.
- Set your own pace. No one can force you to do anything. You'll find you gradually gain confidence in your ability to cope.
- Control your symptoms by learning and practising breathing and relaxation techniques. This can help you control the level of anxiety you experience so that it is manageable. You can find out more about relaxation techniques from your doctor or counsellor, or from the organisations listed later. Your local library may be able to supply books or tapes.

"I never realised the others at work felt the same way until we talked about it. It was much easier to talk to the manager about it when it wasn't just yourself."

- Allow yourself a breathing space. Do something you really enjoy or treat yourself. Perhaps there's something you used to like doing but haven't done for a while.
- Take a step back and think about how you live your life. If you're overloaded, work out what's most important to you, and shed what is not important.
- If someone else is making too many demands on you – your boss or a family member perhaps – try to work out a plan for talking to them about it without blaming them. It may help to do this with other people who are affected too, so you can deal with it together.
- Exercise has been shown to benefit generalised anxiety disorders, phobias and panic attacks. Taking up walking, swimming or yoga can help relieve tension.
- Review your diet, caffeine intake, alcohol and smoking intake, try to eat healthily and take a moderate amount of exercise. If you use illegal drugs then plan to reduce and cut these out. You may find it helpful to discuss ways of reducing smoking, drinking and illegal drug use with your doctor.
- Identify and challenge exaggerated worries and pessimistic thoughts.
- Talk about your anxiety problems with other people such as trusted family members, friends or at self-help groups.

Asking ourselves the following questions might be helpful in challenging anxious fears:

SEVEN THOUGHT CHALLENGE QUESTIONS

- What would I tell a friend who said the same thing?
- If I wasn't feeling like this, what would I say?
- Am I basing this on how I feel rather than the facts?
- What would other people say? Have I heard different opinions from others about the same thought?
- Am I looking at the whole picture? Are there any other ways of explaining the situation that are more accurate?
- What would I say about this looking back six months from the future?
- Do I apply one set of standards to myself and another to others?

by Chris Williams, 2005. Taken from www.livinglifetothefull.com

Some people find it is not important to look for answers about what caused them to become so anxious.

self help

A self-help approach can be an important part of recovery, and self-help books can help us find out important

"It's been a life-saver for me coming here. The others gave me lots of reassurance. They were very patient. I felt better just because I was able to talk about things openly."

information about anxiety and how it affects us. They can also help us learn new skills to help us challenge worrying thoughts, and learn ways of building confidence and facing up to fears. It can be very helpful to learn one or more relaxation techniques. In addition, many people find attending a self-help

group is helpful. Groups provide mutual support and are an important source of information.

"For me it was very important to have company and something to do. Coming to the group was a big help in that respect. It was a distraction, kept my mind off my worries."

Self-help groups can provide a lot of moral support and encouragement. They may also offer advice and training in relaxation and information on complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, acupuncture and homeopathy. Some people find these very useful, although you may find you have to pay for them.

getting help from others

It may be that what we can do on our own is not enough. We may find it hard to be open about our fears and anxieties and take up help from people we do not yet know or trust. But it may also be an enormous relief to stop putting on a brave face and to find that we can be helped.

There are various sources of support available to people whom experience anxiety, each offering different kinds of help. It's worth contacting the organisations listed later in this booklet to find out what is available in your area.

If you experience symptoms of anxiety it is important to visit your doctor to have a medical check-up to rule out any physical cause.

counselling and psychotherapy

People sometimes find it hard to talk about their difficulties but it is important to seek help and support. Counselling and psychotherapy give people the chance to talk through their problems. Both focus on present feelings about difficulties, which may be current or rooted in the past, and enable us to take more control of our life and to cope in the longer-term. They are sometimes called 'talking treatments' because they give people a chance to talk through their difficulties.

The most effective talking therapies focus on helping people overcome their current problems. Overall, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) appears to be the most effective

available form of psychotherapy, especially in the treatment of panic attacks, generalised anxiety disorder and phobias. CBT helps people to change thinking patterns that prevent them from overcoming their fears and seeks to change reactions to anxiety provoking situations.

In either it is important we find someone we can trust and relate to. A counsellor or therapist may be able to help us learn how to control our anxiety. They may use relaxation training or they may use other techniques to help us improve how we feel. Your doctor may be able to put you in touch with these sources of help. Some voluntary organisations provide free counselling and it's worth contacting those listed at the end of this booklet to find out if a trained counsellor is available.

medical treatment

Your doctor is likely to treat you him or herself, although they may suggest you see a psychologist or a psychiatrist or other member of the mental health team for specialist help.

A prescription of anti-anxiety medication may be made (for example benzodiazepines which are tranquillisers). They can offer some relief and can be helpful in the short term to get through a crisis. Regular use of these drugs may lead to dependence and is likely to result in the return of fear or panic symptoms when discontinued. As a result, they are generally only prescribed for a short period of time. Tranquillisers are now rarely used and few are recommended for more than one month.

If you are having difficulty sleeping, your doctor may also prescribe sleeping tablets, again, for a short time.

A number of medications originally approved for treating depression have been shown to be effective for anxiety disorders and you may therefore be prescribed these. Most antidepressants take two to four weeks before they have any effect on our mood, so it is important not to give up too quickly if we do not feel better straight away. Antidepressants should be taken as prescribed. Some patients experience mild symptoms when stopping, reducing or missing the dose. These can include dizziness, nausea, anxiety and headaches. The drugs however are not associated with tolerance and craving.

If there is an improvement on treatment with antidepressants, the medication should be taken for at least six months. It is important to then go back to your doctor to find out if you need to continue with treatment. Some people may be advised to continue treatment for longer than six months.

It is important you get your doctor to explain the treatment offered. You will also receive an information sheet with the tablets prescribed from your pharmacist.

the role of partner, family and friends

As a friend or relative you can help by being patient and understanding, and listening to what your friend or family member has to say. The first thing you can do is to try to accept that their anxiety is a real problem. Sometimes, friends and relatives unhelpfully try to suggest that the

person 'try to pull themselves together', 'snap out of it' or 'try not to think about it'.

To show how unhelpful this is, try NOT thinking about a pink elephant. No, I said *don't* think about a pink elephant. Why are you thinking about a pink elephant? What we need to do is replace the thoughts we don't want with thoughts we do want. You can't *not* think about something. We can only think about something else.

Instead of trying hard not to think about their worries, those with feelings of anxiety should be encouraged to try to learn new ways of challenging and re-balancing their worrying thoughts. Providing practical support and encouragement is important.

Encourage the person to talk about how they feel and what you can do to support them. Let them set the pace but encourage them to make more changes at a realistic rate. They may need you to help in practical ways with everyday chores, but it is important that you don't take over.

Offering support can take all kinds of forms, from saying 'well done' or offering a hug, to letting someone know you still care. It is hard living with someone who is anxious; they can be withdrawn, dependent and might not try anything you suggest. If you can show that you are on their side, it can be an enormous relief. With your help, they can then begin to find ways of overcoming the anxiety.

Someone who is anxious may need a great deal of prompting and support to seek help. You can assist by finding out about local support groups or relaxation

classes. The organisations listed later can help with this. You could also go with your friend or relative to a group or to a doctor's appointment. One thing to watch out for is offering too much reassurance and support. Although offering practical help and encouragement is valuable, make sure you do not take over everything from the person. For example, if someone fears going to the supermarket doing the shopping for him or her will keep the anxiety alive. Doing the shopping with them will help the person face their fears. The danger is that this worsens how they feel by undermining their confidence.

It is sometimes difficult supporting someone who is very anxious. It is upsetting to see someone we love experience such distress. Sometimes we can struggle to know what to say and how best to offer support. If difficulties persist for some time, we may find that we also struggle to cope ourselves. This is especially the case when someone we are close to finds it difficult to venture out or if they begin to push us away or become very reassurance-seeking or dependent on us.

It is important that you look after yourself and consider your needs too. Keep up with your own friends and interests. Make sure you find time to do the things you enjoy, including some things outside the home.

If you are doing a lot to help out practically, you may feel resentful and become increasingly worn out by the burden of it. If you find that you are no longer enjoying

"It was so hard to be sympathetic. He seemed to get himself in a state about nothing, he was helpless. I would get angry and shout – then I'd feel so mean."

life as you used to, you may be experiencing symptoms of depression. If this is the case, please discuss these issues with your doctor or healthcare practitioner who can advise you how best to seek help.

Find an outlet for your feelings, someone you can talk to about your concerns. It might be your doctor, a close friend or another member of a support group for people in situations like your own. After all, if you take care of yourself, you will feel more confident in helping your friend or relative.

looking ahead

Learning to be able to control anxiety is not easy, nor is it always a quick process. It takes time to rebuild shattered confidence and trust. Some people find that their anxiety doesn't go away completely, but they do succeed in keeping it at a manageable level.

"I felt like I'd been asleep for all that time. I'd gone through a long, bad dream."

There may be times when you hit set-backs, perhaps if something unexpected or more difficult crops up. It needs patience to carry on and not be discouraged but if you do, you will gradually feel more confident. A key element of change is challenging your fears and tackling any avoidance that may cause stress. That takes courage, but with a clear plan and a step-by-step approach, you can succeed.

useful websites

The national organisations listed below can put you in touch with local sources of help in your area.

www.first-steps.org

First Steps to Freedom

www.glasgowsteps.com

Glasgow's South-East
Psychosocial Services

www.livinglifetothefull.com

Living Life to the Full – life skills package – discover how to challenge fears, learn relaxation and build confidence.

www.no-panic.org.uk

No Panic

www.ocdaction.org.uk

Obsessive Action

www.phobics-society.org.uk

National Phobics Society

www.triumphoverphobia.com

Triumph over Phobia

useful addresses

Breathing Space Scotland

Tel: 0800 83 85 87

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Confidential telephone line for people to call when they are feeling down or distressed.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

The Globe Centre

PO Box 9

Accrington BB5 0XB

Tel: 01254 875277

Email: babcp@babcp.com

www.babcp.com

Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland

18 Viewfield Street

Stirling FK8 1UA

Tel: 01786 475140

Email: info@cosca.org.uk

www.cosca.org.uk

Depression Alliance Scotland

3 Grosvenor Gardens

Edinburgh EH12 5JU

Tel: 0131 467 3050

Email: info@dascot.org

www.depressionalliance.scotland.org

NHS24

Delta House
50 West Nile Street
Glasgow G1 2NP
Tel: 08454 24 24 24
www.nhs24.com

NHS 24 is a 24-hour health service for Scotland.

The Richmond Fellowship Scotland

26 Park Circus
Glasgow G3 6AP
Tel: 0141 353 4050
Email: info@trfs.org.uk

Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)

Cumbræ House
15 Carlton Court
Glasgow G5 9JP
Tel: 0141 568 7000
Email: enquire@samh.org.uk
www.samh.org.uk

The Scottish Association for Mental Health is the major voluntary organisation in Scotland working to promote mental health.

Stresswatch Scotland (formerly Action on Phobias Association Scotland)

The Barn
42 Barnweil Road
Kilmarnock KA1 4JE
Tel: 01563 574144
Email: info@stresswatchscotland.org
www.stresswatchscotland.org

suggestions for reading

There are many publications about anxiety and your doctor or local library will be able to suggest some for you. Here are a few that might help.

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook

by Edmund J Bourne
Published by New Harbinger, 1995.
ISBN 157-224413-5

Living with Fear

by Isaac Marks.
Published by McGraw-Hill
Education, 2005.
ISBN 007-710982-1

Overcoming Anxiety: A Five Areas Approach

by Chris Williams
Published by Hodder Arnold,
2003.
ISBN 034-081005-X

Overcoming Low Self-esteem

by Melanie Fennell.
Published by Constable and
Robinson, 1999.
ISBN 185-487725-9

Overcoming Social Anxiety: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques

by Gillian Butler.
Published by Constable and
Robinson, 1999.
ISBN 185-487703-8

Self-help for Your Nerves: Learn to Relax and Enjoy Life Again by Overcoming Stress and Fear

by Claire Weekes.
Published by HarperCollins, 2000.
ISBN 072-253155-9

Other topics covered by the *Talking About...* series are:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Bereavement
- Bipolar affective disorders
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Panic attacks
- Personality disorders
- Phobias
- Postnatal depression
- Schizophrenia
- Self-harm
- Stress

Contact your local health promotion resource service for copies. You can access their details via www.show.nhs.uk

Our publications are available in other formats and languages. For further information please contact Health Scotland.

