



Let's Talk About **ANXIETY**

Mental Health Charter



What is 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 feel that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. Most people feel anxious at times. It's particularly common to experience some anxiety while coping with stressful events or changes, especially if they could have a big impact on your life.

When Does Anxiety Become Mental Health Challenge?

Anxiety can become a mental health problem if it impacts your ability to live your life as fully as you want to. For example, it may be a problem 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's also possible to experience problems with anxiety without having a specific diagnosis.

What are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety can be experienced in lots of different ways. If your experiences meet certain criteria your doctor might diagnose you with a specific anxiety disorder.

Some commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders are:

- **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)**

This means having regular or uncontrollable worries about many different things in your everyday life. Because there are lots of possible symptoms of anxiety this can be quite a broad diagnosis, meaning that the problems you experience with GAD might be quite different from another person's experiences.

- **Social anxiety disorder**

This diagnosis means you experience extreme fear or anxiety triggered by social situations (such as parties, workplaces, or everyday situations where you have to talk to another person). It is also known as social phobia.

- **Panic disorder**

This means having regular or frequent panic attacks without a clear cause or trigger. Experiencing panic disorder can mean that you feel constantly afraid of having another panic attack, to the point that this fear itself can trigger your panic attacks.

- **Phobias**

A phobia is an extreme fear or anxiety triggered by a particular situation (such as going outside) or a particular object (such as spiders).

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

This is a diagnosis you may be given if you develop anxiety problems after going through something you found traumatic. PTSD can involve experiencing flashbacks or nightmares which can feel like you're re-living all the fear and anxiety you experienced at the time of the traumatic events.

- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**

You may be given this diagnosis if your anxiety problems involve having repetitive thoughts, behaviours or urges.

- **Health anxiety**

This means you experience obsessions and compulsions relating to illness, including researching symptoms or checking to see if you have them. It is related to OCD. You can find out more about health anxiety on the Anxiety UK website.

- **Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)**

This means you experience obsessions and compulsions relating to your physical appearance.

Effects of Anxiety on Your Body

These can include:

- a churning feeling in your stomach
- feeling light-headed or dizzy
- pins and needles
- 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
- sleep problems
- grinding your teeth, especially at night
- nausea (feeling sick)
- needing the toilet more or less often
- changes in your sex drive
- having panic attacks.

Effects of Anxiety on Your Mind

These can include:

- 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're anxious and are looking at you
- feeling like you can't 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're losing touch with reality
- low mood and depression
- rumination – thinking a lot about bad experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again
- depersonalisation – a type of dissociation where you feel disconnected from your mind or body, or like you are a character that you are watching in a film
- derealisation – another type of dissociation where you feel disconnected from the world around you, or like the world isn't real

“I constantly thought I was dying of undiagnosed illnesses, because I was convinced that the physical symptoms were too bad to be 'just anxiety'.”

Other Effects of Anxiety

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

This can including:

- looking after yourself
- holding down a 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. Please see the [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) page on discrimination at work to know your rights.

Panic Attacks

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're choking
- feeling like your legs are shaky or are turning to jelly
- feeling disconnected from your mind, body or surroundings, which are types of dissociation.

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that you're:

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

Panic attacks happen at different times for everyone. Some people have one panic attack then don't 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 to 20 minutes. They can come on very quickly. Your symptoms will usually 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're having a second panic attack, or you're 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 print off these tips, or write them down, 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.
- Stamp on the spot. Some people find this helps control their breathing.
- Focus on your senses. For example, taste mint-flavoured sweets or gum, or touch or cuddle something soft.
- Try grounding techniques. Grounding techniques can help you feel more in control. They're especially useful if you experience dissociation during panic attacks.

After a panic attack:

- Think about self-care. It's important to pay attention to what your body needs after you've 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've had a panic attack. It could be particularly helpful to mention how they might notice if you're having another one, and how you'd like them to help you.

What is a Panic Disorder?

If you're having lots of panic attacks at unpredictable times and there doesn't seem to be a particular trigger or cause, you might be given a diagnosis of panic disorder. It's common to experience panic disorder and certain types of phobia together. People who experience panic disorder may have some periods with few or no panic attacks, but have lots at other times.

Panic disorder and high sensitivity

Some research suggests that people who have panic disorder might be very sensitive to sensory experiences (such as sunlight, smells and changes in the weather), but there's not enough evidence yet to say for sure.

How Can I Help Myself?

Living with anxiety can be very difficult, but there are steps you can take that might help. The next couple pages have some suggestions for you to consider.

Talk to Someone You Trust

Talking to someone you trust about what's 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 aren't able to open up to someone close to you, please see the helplines listed at the end of this booklet.

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.

Complementary and Alternative Therapies

You may find that complementary and alternative therapies help you to manage your anxiety.

There are many types that you can try, to see what works for you. These include:

- yoga
- meditation
- aromatherapy
- massage
- reflexology
- herbal treatments
- hypnotherapy

Some people find that one or more of these methods can help them to relax or sleep better.

Seeking Professional Help

Talking therapies

There are two types of talking treatment recommended for anxiety and panic:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – this focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behaviour, and teaches you coping skills for dealing with different problems.
- Applied relaxation therapy – this involves learning how to relax your muscles in situations where you normally experience anxiety.

Medication

Your doctor might offer to prescribe you medication to help manage your symptoms. Some people find it helpful to try talking therapies and medication at the same time, but medication shouldn't be the only thing you're offered.

How Do I Access Treatment?

To get treatment on the NHS, the first step is normally to visit your GP. They will do an assessment, which might include asking you to fill in a questionnaire about how often you feel worried, anxious and nervous.

They should then explain your treatment options to you, and you can decide together what might suit you best. There can be long waitlists for these NHS services, if you need urgent support please see the helplines at the end of this booklet.

What If My Anxiety Stops Me From Seeking Help?

It can be especially hard to get treatment if making or attending an appointment with your doctor involves doing something that causes lots of anxiety for you. For example, you might not feel able to talk on the phone or leave the house.

Here are some things you could try:

- Ask your doctor if they offer home visits or telephone assessments. If not, they might be able to book you an appointment at a time when the surgery tends to be quiet.
- Some GP practices will allow someone else to ring up and book appointments for you (with your consent). It could also help to have someone come with you to the appointment for support.
- Depending on what's available in your area, you may be able to refer yourself for talking therapy at a local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. Some IAPT services are delivered online or over the phone. You can search for IAPT services on the NHS website.

Anxiety Based Helplines

Anxiety Care UK

anxietycare.org.uk

Helps people with anxiety disorders.

Hub of Hope

hubofhope.co.uk

UK-wide mental health service database. Lets you search for local, national, peer, community, charity, private and NHS mental health support. You can filter results to find specific kinds of support.

Anxiety UK

[03444 775 774](tel:03444775774) (helpline)

[07537 416 905](tel:07537416905) (text)

anxietyuk.org.uk

Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

No Panic

[0300 7729844](tel:03007729844)

nopanic.org.uk

Provides a helpline, step-by-step programmes, and support for people with anxiety disorders.