

Anxietyⁱ

Anxiety is common and treatable

An anxiety problem **does not** mean that you are weak, that you are losing your mind, or that you have a personality problem. Severe anxiety is a problem that **can be overcome** with treatment. Effective treatments are available.

What is anxiety?

The word 'anxiety' is used to describe the mental and physical response to feared and threatening situations. This reaction can include trembling, choking, increased heart rate, sweating, feelings of unreality and so on. Anxiety is a normal response experienced by everyone at times. Nearly being hit by a car, sitting for an exam or giving a public talk are all examples of situations in which most people would experience some anxiety.

You are likely to be suffering from an anxiety disorder if you experience any of the following:

- The anxiety reaction occurs frequently.
- Your fears are out of proportion to the situation.
- You start to avoid places or situations where you experience anxiety.
- It interferes with your working, social or family life.

Different forms of anxiety

1. Panic disorder
2. Agoraphobia
3. Social phobia
4. Generalized anxiety

Try to work out which of the following descriptions best fit your situation.

Panic disorder

People who suffer from 'panic disorder' are likely to experience attacks of sudden and intense anxiety. These panics cannot be associated with events occurring around the person. The person is generally free from anxiety in between panics.

Common symptoms of panic disorders include the following:

Psychological symptoms

- fear of dying
- fear of going crazy
- feelings of unreality.

Physical symptoms

- tightness or pain in the chest
- shortness of breath
- choking sensation
- pounding heart
- numbness/tingling sensation in fingers and feet

- light-headedness
- sweating
- hot and cold flushes
- nausea
- trembling
- dizziness and light-headedness.

Panics are also common with the other anxiety disorders; however, those panics are easier to predict because they mostly occur in response to the feared situation(s).

Social phobia

The main feature of 'social phobia' is the fear of being the focus of attention or subject of criticism. People with this disorder may worry that they will do something silly or embarrassing in front of others. Often social phobia is experienced in many different social situations. This leads to the avoidance of these situations.

Commonly feared situations include:

- speaking in front of others
- being the centre of attention
- asking questions
- social activities such as lunches, dinners, parties, marriages, religious gatherings/festivals, etc.
- eating in front of others
- writing in front of others

Agoraphobia

People who have agoraphobia experience psychological and physical anxiety and often panics, in particular places or situations, in which:

- there is a sense of being trapped or being unable to leave or escape
- it would not be easy to get help should the need arise
- the environment is different and unfamiliar
- they have had a panic before.

This leads to the avoidance of many situations and can severely affect day-to-day life. In extreme cases, people who suffer from agoraphobia find it difficult to leave the house.

Examples of commonly feared or avoided situations are leaving home, travelling alone, crowds, public places.

Generalized anxiety disorder

Generalized anxiety is different from the other anxiety disorders. The experience of anxiety is not linked to specific situations or to a fear of having panic attacks. It is ongoing general anxiety, tension and excessive worrying about normal events and the future. You may feel worried most of the time about things that might go wrong or find that you are tense without knowing exactly what you are worried about. However, you are less likely to have all the feelings that are listed under 'panic' and 'phobias', such as fear of dying or fear of going crazy.

What might trigger anxiety?

There are many possible triggers for anxiety. It often starts during periods of psychological or physical stress.

Examples of psychological and physical stress include the following:

Psychological

- relationship break-ups

- lack of sleep

Physical

- physical illness

- severe arguments
- loss of someone close
- loss of a job
- work pressure
- financial problems
- physical and sexual abuse.
- excessive use of alcohol
- domestic violence
- abuse of other drugs
- trauma.

Breathing too quickly and deeply

When people experience stress, they have a natural tendency to breathe more quickly and deeply. It is surprising for people to learn that breathing too quickly and/or deeply (also known as 'over breathing' or 'hyperventilation') can itself bring on anxiety. Breathing too quickly lowers the amount of carbon dioxide in your lungs and, by a complicated series of processes, this causes physical symptoms of anxiety.

Other important things to note:

- You can get physical anxiety by slightly overbreathing for a long time. Therefore, overbreathing does not have to be obvious to you or to others.
- If you slightly overbreathe, even a yawn or sigh can trigger a panic attack or physical symptoms of anxiety.
- Changing the way you breathe can be useful for managing anxiety.

Over breathing is a habit and it takes time to change.

Worry and negative thinking

When people experience stress, there is also a tendency to worry more than usual. Worry and unrealistic or negative thinking can be triggers of anxiety. People who get anxious sometimes think in ways that bring on the anxiety or make it worse. *For example, you can:*

- concentrate entirely on unpleasant things, dwell on them and ignore good things
- spend a lot of time worrying about something that never happens anyway
- think everything is going wrong when only one thing has actually gone wrong
- misinterpret what other people are doing and thinking, for example, assuming that other people are looking at you and thinking how silly you are.

Often changing the way you think and reducing worry can be useful for managing anxiety.

Worry and negative thinking is a habit and it takes time to change.

How is anxiety treated?

Feeling anxious does not necessarily mean you have a problem. Anxiety is a normal response that everyone has to certain situations; however, anxiety is not always useful; sometimes it reaches disabling proportions.

The aim is not to get rid of all anxiety but rather to reduce it to manageable proportions.

The best way to manage anxiety is through **psychological help (counselling) and**

social support. With different psychological methods, it is possible to:

- control and stop panic attacks
- confront feared situations previously avoided
- change negative and unrealistic thinking and reduce worry.

Psychological methods include:

- breathing control, relaxation
- problem solving
- balancing anxious thinking with reassuring thoughts (cognitive therapy)
- gradually facing the things that you fear (graded exposure).

These psychological methods are often taught in **Anxiety management courses.**

Tablets are sometimes prescribed for anxiety. *Tranquillisers* can make people feel calmer. They also help with difficulties sleeping. They work quite quickly but can be addictive. Because of this, they are recommended for short-term use and only when the anxiety experienced is very severe and psychological methods are also being used. *Antidepressants* are sometimes also prescribed, especially for someone who feels depressed as well as anxious. These tablets work quite slowly at first and may take two weeks to work properly. They sometimes have side-effects, such as a dry mouth. They are not addictive and are usually given over quite a long time. *Beta-blockers* slow down the activity of the heart and are sometimes prescribed to control a fast or irregular heartbeat and other bodily symptoms of anxiety. They may be useful in the short-term treatment of 'stage fright' or panic symptoms, although they do not help people to stop avoiding the things they fear. Your doctor will explain what he or she is prescribing for you and why. You can also ask the pharmacist who gives you the tablets.

Tablets do not solve problems or cure anxiety in the long term. Even when the tablets are an important help, in the long run we all have to solve our problems ourselves. So even if you have been prescribed tablets, it is still important to try to do other things as well to overcome your anxiety.

How to reduce anxiety

Feeling anxious does not necessarily mean you have a problem. Anxiety is a normal response that everyone has to certain situations; but anxiety is not always useful; sometimes it reaches disabling proportions.

The aim is not to get rid of all anxiety but rather to reduce it to manageable proportions

The first thing to do is to be clear about what the problem is. The next two exercises will help you describe and understand the problem.

1 Identify your symptoms of anxiety

Mark on the scale how much you experience each symptom. If you have other symptoms, write them on another piece of paper and also *rate* them.

Symptom	Symptom severity		Moderate	Severe
	Not at all	Mild		

Psychological

Worry	_____	_____	_____	_____
Fear of loss of control	_____	_____	_____	_____
Fear of dying	_____	_____	_____	_____
Fear of going crazy	_____	_____	_____	_____
Feelings of unreality	_____	_____	_____	_____

Physical

Trembling	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tightness/pain in the chest	_____	_____	_____	_____
Shortness of breath/choking	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sweating	_____	_____	_____	_____
Pounding heart	_____	_____	_____	_____
Hot and cold flushes	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dizziness/light-headedness	_____	_____	_____	_____

2 Identify situations or places that you fear or avoid

It is common for people to experience anxiety in certain situations or places but not in others. It is also common for people to avoid those situations so that they can avoid the feeling of anxiety.

Do you fear or avoid anything? If you do, write them down and discuss them with your doctor and/or counsellor or someone else you trust.

eg speaking in front of a group.

.....

Now add to the list below any other situations or places that you fear or avoid. Mark on the scale how much you fear or avoid each of the items. It will help you to overcome your anxiety if you repeat this task every time you think of a new situation or place that you fear or avoid. Discuss these with your doctor and/or counsellor or someone else you trust.

Places/situations	<i>Fear or avoidance</i>			
	Not at all	Mild	Moderate	Severe
Eating or drinking with other people	_____	_____	_____	_____
Being watched or stared at	_____	_____	_____	_____
Talking to people in authority	_____	_____	_____	_____
Speaking in public	_____	_____	_____	_____
Being criticized	_____	_____	_____	_____
Asking for directions in the street	_____	_____	_____	_____
Ordering in a restaurant	_____	_____	_____	_____
Asking for help in a shop	_____	_____	_____	_____
Travelling alone or by bus	_____	_____	_____	_____
Walking alone on busy streets	_____	_____	_____	_____
Going into crowded shops	_____	_____	_____	_____
Going to the movies	_____	_____	_____	_____
Taking elevators	_____	_____	_____	_____

Keep the description of your problem so that you can discuss it with your doctor, counsellor or friend. Some methods of reducing anxiety are appropriate for certain types of anxiety problems. For example, learning controlled breathing is particularly useful for controlling panics and gradually facing the situations and things that you fear (exposure) is particularly useful for phobias. Discuss what is most appropriate for you with your health worker.

You can also do these exercises every week, so that you can see the progress you are making.

Remember: Most people have ups and downs as they get over their problems. Occasional setbacks are normal. They do not mean that you are not making progress overall.

3 Try physical exercise

Specifically, aerobic exercise is the form of exercise most consistently shown to reduce anxiety, and the duration should be of more than twenty minutes. Anxiety reduction achieved through aerobic exercise is similar to the reduction achieved through meditation or relaxation.

4 Check your caffeine intake

Try to avoid drinking too much tea and coffee as caffeine can increase anxiety levels.

5 Check your alcohol intake

People who are anxious may try to cope with the anxiety by drinking more alcohol. This makes things worse. Guidelines for what is 'low-risk' drinking are presented below. Individuals will differ in terms of what level will cause harm.

→ For men

Up to three units of alcohol a day; no alcoholic drinking for two days a week; a maximum of 15 units of alcohol a week

→ For women

Up to two units of alcohol a day; no alcoholic drinking for two days a week; a maximum of 10 units of alcohol a week.

As a rough guide, there is ONE unit of alcohol in:

- half a pint of ordinary strength (3.5 or 4% ABV) beer, lager or cider
- a small glass (125 ml) of lower strength wine (8–9% ABV)
- a single 25 ml pub measure of spirits (40% ABV)

In a typical day, how many units of alcohol do you have?

On how many days in a typical week do you drink?

Is this above the safe limits for your gender?

If you would like help to reduce your drinking, ask your health worker for more information.

6 Dealing with worries and problems

If you find that you are worrying, endlessly turning over your different problems in your head, try putting your worry to a useful purpose. Pick out one or two problems that seem really important, and make a decision to resolve them. You may like to ask a friend to help you.

Sit down with a problem-solving sheet (your health worker can provide you with one) and go through the following steps:

1. Say exactly what the problem (or goal) is.
2. List five or six possible solutions to the problem. Write down any ideas that occur to you, not merely the 'good' ideas.
3. Evaluate the good and bad points of each idea in turn.
4. Choose the solution that best fits your needs.
5. Plan exactly the steps you will take to put the solution into action.
6. Review your efforts after attempting to carry out the plan. Praise all efforts. If unsuccessful, start again.

Your health worker can give you more information about problem solving techniques.

7 Practice relaxation

Many people find that learning to relax helps them reduce worry and anxiety. It can also help improve sleep and relieve physical symptoms caused by stress, such as headaches or stomach pains. Learning to relax is a skill and takes practice before it can be done properly.

You may want to try a relaxation or yoga class at an adult education class or other centre near you. Your health worker can also give you a sheet with information on how to relax.

8 Coping with unpleasant thoughts and anxious feelings

Identifying anxious thoughts and balancing them with more realistic ones is a skill that takes time and practice to learn. A separate information sheet is available.

9 Gradually exposing yourself to feared situations

Some people have fears that seem, even to them, to be irrational — such as a fear of eating in front of other people or fear of being away from a safe place. Symptoms of anxiety or panic occur only in those particular situations. The key strategy for overcoming fears of this kind involves constructing a plan to gradually expose yourself to what you fear, in small steps, so that you tackle what you fear without becoming too frightened. Separate information sheets on this topic are available.

10 Learn controlled breathing

It is surprising for people to learn that breathing too quickly and/or deeply (also known as over-breathing or hyperventilation) can itself bring on anxiety. Breathing too quickly lowers the amount of carbon dioxide in your lungs and, by a complicated series of processes, this causes physical symptoms of anxiety.

Other important things to note:

- You can get physical anxiety by slightly overbreathing for a long time
So overbreathing does not have to be obvious to you or to others
- If you slightly overbreathe; even a yawn or sigh can trigger a panic attack or physical symptoms of anxiety

- Changing the way you breathe can be useful for managing anxiety.

Getting to know your breathing habits

The following exercises will help you learn more about your breathing habits. First, check to see if you have any of the following symptoms of over breathing.

- | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| You breathe more than 10–12 breaths a minute at rest | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not sure | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Your chest sometimes feels overexpanded or tight | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not sure | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| You/others have noticed that you sigh or yawn quite a bit | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not sure | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| You often gasp or take deep breaths, particularly in situations that make you anxious | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not sure | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If you are positive to any of these, it is likely that you overbreathe.

Slow breathing to reduce anxiety

When you get physical symptoms of anxiety, for example breathlessness, it feels like you are not breathing enough. The natural response is to breathe in more; however, if you do try to get more air by breathing in more, it just makes the problem worse. The best solution is to slow down your breathing even though you may feel that you should speed it up. Now we suggest a slow breathing technique to stop the unpleasant feelings of anxiety.

Remember to breathe in using your abdomen (not your chest) and through your nose.

- ➔ Breathe in slowly to the count of three seconds
- ➔ When you get to three, slowly breathe out to the count of three seconds
- ➔ Pause for three seconds before breathing in again
- ➔ Continue this exercise for five minutes or so
- ➔ Practise twice a day for 10 minutes (five minutes is better than nothing)
- ➔ Try to check and slow down your breathing during the day
- ➔ Use the slow breathing technique whenever you get anxious.

Remember the technique of slow breathing sounds very simple and it is very effective, but it will take practise to master the technique.

ⁱ Adapted, with permission, from World Health Organization. *Mental Disorders in Primary Care, a WHO Education Package*, 1998.