

Are you Anxiety Aware?

**A guide to living
with Anxiety**

**Mental Health
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**mental
health
foundation**



Introduction

Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their lives, whether it's preparing for a job interview or bringing up a child. It is normal to experience anxiety in everyday situations, however persistent and excessive anxiety can cause more serious mental health problems.

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems in nearly every country in the world and, while a low level of anxiety can be a useful motivating force, in some cases it can take over your life. This booklet explores what anxiety is, how it affects us and what to do if it goes beyond a 'healthy' level.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a type of fear usually associated with a perceived threat or something going wrong in the future, but it can also arise from something happening right now. Unlike fear itself, which is a response to an immediate danger, anxiety is an ongoing sense of worry without a specific cause.

Most people get through passing moments of anxiety with no lasting effect. But chronic anxiety can affect concentration, have a damaging effect on relationships or even stop people leaving the house. Around 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem like anxiety each year, and it is likely that people don't seek help, meaning many remain without a diagnosis.

Therefore being able to recognise the different forms of anxiety and how they affect us, as well as adopting positive coping strategies, is vital.

What are the different types of anxiety?

Different types of anxiety have their own characteristics and cause our bodies to react in a variety of ways.

Agoraphobia is an intense anxiety which triggers a panic response, commonly associated with open spaces. Onset of agoraphobia is usually between the ages of 18 and 35.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is the most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorder and usually affects young adults. While feelings of anxiety are normal, people with GAD find it hard to control them to an extent that limits their daily life.

Panic is an exaggeration of the body's normal response to fear, stress or excitement. Symptoms include a pounding heart, feeling faint, sweating, shaky limbs, nausea, chest pains, breathing discomfort and feelings of losing control.

A **phobia** is an intense and irrational fear of a specific object or situation which makes the person experiencing it go to great lengths to avoid it.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or syndrome, is a reaction to highly stressful or traumatising events. People commonly experience flashbacks, panic attacks, nightmares or avoid situations that might trigger memories of the event.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorders (OCD) are characterised by unwanted, intrusive, or repetitive feelings that make the individual feel driven to do something to get rid of the obsessive thoughts.

What makes you anxious?

Feelings of anxiety can be caused by lots of things and vary according to what you're worried about and how you act when you feel apprehensive.

They depend on many factors, like your genes, how you were brought up, what's happened to you in your life and the way you learn and cope with things. Just knowing what makes you anxious and why can be the first steps to managing anxiety. Our survey asked UK adults about what makes them most anxious.

Financial issues

Almost half of those surveyed (45%) said that financial issues caused them to feel anxious. People of working age, in part-time employment and the unemployed were far more worried about their finances than those aged 55 and over, which is perhaps unsurprising given the increase in anxiety since the start of the economic recession.

Work

Work issues, such as long hours, were a cause of anxiety for over a quarter of people (27%). People diagnosed with anxiety and depression have one of the lowest rates of employment, so it makes sense that 17% said the fear of losing their job or unemployment caused them to feel anxious.

Loved ones

Anxiety related to family and relationships featured prominently in the survey, with personal relationships causing anxious feelings for 26% of people, particularly those aged 18–24 (44%) and students (46%).

Ageing

The thought of growing old caused anxiety in 36% of those aged 55 years and above, compared to just 15% of 18–24 year olds. Similarly 29% of the people surveyed from the oldest age group felt anxious about the death of a loved one compared to 13% from the youngest age group.

Loneliness

Interestingly young people aged 18–24 (28%) were twice as likely to mention loneliness as a cause of anxiety than those aged 55 and over (14%). Women (19%) were slightly more likely than men (13%) to mention loneliness, while students, people working part-time and or not working were most likely to worry about being alone.

Source: YouGov Plc April 2014

What are the signs of anxiety and how do you spot them?

Life is full of potentially stressful events and it is normal to feel anxious about everyday things. There can be a single trigger or event that raises anxiety levels, but generally it may be a number of things that increase anxiety levels, including exams, work deadlines, how we think we look, going on a first date or whether we feel safe travelling home late at night.

Anxiety has a strong effect on us because it is one of our natural survival responses. It causes our minds and bodies to speed up to prepare us to respond to an emergency.

These are some of the physical things that might happen:

- Rapid and/or irregular heartbeat
- Fast breathing
- Weakened/tense muscles
- Sweating
- Churning stomach/loose bowels
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth

Anxiety also has a psychological impact, which can include:

- Feeling worried all the time
- Trouble sleeping
- Lack of concentration
- Feeling irritable
- Feeling depressed
- Loss of self-confidence

It can be hard to break this cycle, but you can learn to feel less worried and to cope with your anxiety so it doesn't stop you enjoying life.

Managing anxiety

**“A person cannot just simply decide not to be anxious anymore”
(Anxiety Care UK).**

Fear and anxiety can affect all of us every now and then. Most people get through passing moments of anxiety with no lasting effect. People experiencing anxiety in their everyday lives often find the personal resources to cope through simple remedies.

Helping yourself

Talking it through

Although it can be difficult to open up about feeling anxious, it can be helpful to talk to friends, family or someone who has had a similar experience. Although you might feel embarrassed or afraid to discuss your feelings with others, sharing can be a way to cope with a problem and having someone to listen to you can help you feel supported.

Face your fear

You are more likely to do the things you want, or need, to do by breaking the cycle of constant avoidance. The chances are the reality of the situation won't be as bad as you expect, making you better equipped to manage, and reduce, your anxiety.

Know yourself

Make a note of when you feel anxious, what happens and the potential triggers. By acknowledging these and arming yourself with tips to deal with these triggers, you will be better prepared in anxiety-inducing situations.

Relax

Learning relaxation techniques can help you calm feelings of anxiety. Practices like yoga, meditation or massage will relax your breathing and help you manage the way you feel about stressful experiences.

Exercise

Even small increases in physical activity levels can trigger brain chemicals that improve your mood, wellbeing and stress levels. This can act as a prevention and treatment for anxiety as well as lead to improved body-image, self-esteem and self-worth.

Healthy eating

Eat lots of fruit and vegetables and try to avoid too much sugar. Very sweet foods cause an initial sugar 'rush,' followed by a sharp dip in blood sugar levels which can give you anxious feelings. Caffeine can also increase anxiety levels so try to avoid drinking too much tea or coffee.

Avoid alcohol or drink in moderation

It's very common for people to drink alcohol when they feel nervous to numb their anxiety, however the effect that alcohol has on how you feel is only temporary. When it wears off you feel worse, potentially more anxious, and your brain will be less able to deal with anxiety naturally.

Faith/spirituality

If you are religious or spiritual, it can help you feel connected to something bigger than yourself. It can provide a way of coping with everyday stress. Being part of a Church or other faith group can be a valuable support network.

Getting help

If you feel anxious all the time, for several weeks or if it feels like your anxiety is taking over your life, then it's a good idea to ask for help or try one of the websites or numbers listed at the back of this booklet. It may be hard to admit to fears that most other people don't seem to have, but asking for help is a sign of strength. The first step is usually to see your GP who will be able to advise you on the different treatments available.

Talking therapies like counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are very effective for people with anxiety problems. CBT helps people to understand the link between negative thoughts and mood and how altering their behaviour can enable them to manage anxiety and feel in control.

Mindfulness is a variation of CBT focusing on changing the relationship between the individual and their thoughts. Using meditation can help people be 'mindful' of their thoughts and break a pattern of negative thinking.

Guided self-help is usually based on CBT methods and aims to help the person understand the nature of their anxiety and equip them with the necessary skills to cope with it. This works by educating the individual to challenge unhelpful thinking, evaluate their symptoms and gradually expose themselves to the source of their anxiety.

Medication is used to provide short-term help, rather than as a cure for anxiety problems. Drugs may be most useful when they are combined with other treatments or support, such as talking therapies.

Support groups are designed for individuals to learn about managing anxiety from asking other people who have experienced it. Local support or self-help groups bring together people with similar experiences to share stories, tips and try out new ways of managing their worries. Your doctor, library or local citizens advice bureau will have details of support groups near you.

Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

Our website offers information on mental health, mental health problems, self-help and how to get help.

mentalhealth.org.uk

020 7803 1100

Anxiety UK

anxietyuk.org.uk

08444 775 774

Anxiety Care

anxietycare.org.uk

020 8478 3400

Be Mindful

Online course in Mindfulness therapy

bemindful.co.uk

NHS Choices

nhs.uk

**British Association for Behavioural
and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)**

babcp.com

01617 054 304

Samaritans

samaritans.org

jo@samaritans.org

08457 909 090

**The British Association of Counselling
& Psychotherapy**

bcap.co.uk

01455 883 300

The British Psychological Society

bps.org.uk

01162 549 568

UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

psychotherapy.org.uk

020 7014 9955

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