

Anxiety

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems:
In 2013, there were 8.2 million cases of anxiety in the UK.

Anxiety describes feelings of unease, worry and fear. Anxiety is a natural human response that occurs under threat or perceived threat. It can be experienced through thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.

We all know what it's like to feel anxious from time to time. It's common to feel tense, nervous and perhaps fearful at the thought of a stressful event or decision, especially if it could have a big impact on life e.g. a job interview. Although it can feel unpleasant anxiety is related to the fight or flight response, which is a normal biological reaction. Like all animals, human beings have evolved ways to help them protect themselves from danger. When under threat our bodies react by releasing certain hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones; make us feel more alert, so we can act faster and make our hearts beat faster, quickly sending blood to where it's needed most. In modern society we don't usually face situation where we need to physically fight or flee from danger but the biological response is still the same.

Because anxiety is a normal human experience it can be hard to know when it's becoming a problem. Anxiety can become a mental health problem if it impacts on the ability to live life as fully as someone may want to. It may be a problem if:

- feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time
- fears or worries are out of proportion to the situation
- someone avoids situations that might cause them to feel anxious
- worries feel very distressing or are hard to control
- someone regularly experience symptoms of anxiety, which could include panic attacks
- someone is finding it hard to go about your everyday life or do things you enjoy.

If someone experiences symptoms a particular set of medical criteria then they might be diagnosed with a particular anxiety disorder. But it's also possible to experience problems with anxiety without having a specific diagnosis.

Types of anxiety disorders

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.

Social anxiety disorder – people with this diagnosis experience extreme fear or anxiety triggered by social situations (such as parties, workplaces, or any situation in which 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. Often people experiencing panic disorder 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 social situations) or a particular object (such as spiders).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – this is a diagnosis given to people who develop anxiety problems after going through something traumatic. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares which can feel like re-living the actual event.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) – people may be given this diagnosis if their anxiety problems involve having repetitive thoughts, behaviours or urges.

Health anxiety – experiencing obsessions and compulsions relating to illness, including researching symptoms or checking to see if you have them. It is related to OCD.

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) – experiencing obsessions and compulsions relating to physical appearance.

What it's like to have anxiety:

Effects on the body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• churning feeling in the 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• problems sleeping• grinding teeth, especially at night• nausea (feeling sick)• needing the toilet more or less often• changes in sex drive• having panic attacks.
Effects on the mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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• feeling like you can't stop worrying, or that bad things will happen

- worrying about anxiety itself, e.g. when panic attacks might happen
- wanting lots of reassurance from other people
- worrying that people are angry or upset with you
- worrying that you're losing touch with reality
- rumination – thinking a lot about bad experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again
- depersonalisation – feeling disconnected from your mind or body, or like you're watching someone else
- derealisation – feeling disconnected from the world around you, or like the world isn't real
- worrying a lot about things that might happen in the future.

Anxiety symptoms can last for a long time, or come and go. They can impact on daily life by:

- impacting on how people look after themselves
- holding down a job
- forming or maintaining relationships
- trying new things
- simply enjoying leisure time.

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

Causes:

No one knows exactly what causes anxiety problems, but there probably lots of factors involved. There are some events that make anxiety problems more likely to happen:

- past or childhood experiences
- your current life situation
- physical and mental health problems
- drugs and medication

Treatment:

There are various evidence-based treatments that have been found to help with anxiety problems and panic disorder.

- self-help resources (computerised CBT (CCBT) and workbooks)
- talking treatments (CBT)
- medication (antidepressants, Pregabalin, beta-blockers, Benzodiazepine tranquillisers).

For family and friends:

Helping someone who is having a panic attack. It can feel frightening to see someone have a panic attack:

- try to stay calm
- gently let them know that you think they might be having a panic attack and that you are there for them
- encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply – it can help to count out loud, or ask them to watch while you gently raise your arm up and down
- encourage them to stamp their feet on the spot
- encourage them to sit somewhere quietly until they feel better.
- You should never encourage someone to breathe into a paper bag during a panic attack. This isn't recommended and it might not be safe.

Don't pressure them to do anything they do not feel comfortable with. Be patient, listen to their wishes and take things at a pace that feels okay for them.

Try to understand - Find out as much as you can about anxiety as this will help you understand what they are going through. Ask about their experience and how it impacts on their life. Listening can help build empathy.

Ask how you can help in distressing situations for example, it might help to take them out of the situation, talk to them calmly or do breathing exercises with them.

Support them to seek help; Offer to help them arrange a doctor's appointment, offer support when they attend appointments, help them research different options for support

Look after yourself: Set boundaries and don't take too much on, Share the caring role with others, if you can. talk to others about how you're feeling and find support for yourself

How this may apply in a work setting:

- Taking more time off work than usual
- Greater use of substances such as alcohol, tobacco and drugs (prescription and illegal)
- Increased irritability, poor concentration, reduced productivity
- Deteriorating personal or work relationships, including bullying behaviours
- Becoming more 'emotional', moody or over-reactive to what others say
- Starting to behave differently that's out of the norm
- Changing of eating and sleep patterns
- Physical reactions such as sweating, palpitations and increased blood pressure
- Feeling negative, depressed and anxious most of the time
- Feeling trapped or frustrated and believing there's no solution
- Changes in time-keeping – arriving early
- Perfectionism