
■ Anxiety

This factsheet aims to explain anxiety. You will find a description of anxiety, its symptoms, and the treatments available. If you are experiencing anxiety, you will find suggestions of ways that you may help yourself and the options open to you. You will also find ideas on how friends and family may help.

What is anxiety?

Everyone knows the feeling of anxiety: the fear that something unpleasant is about to happen. People often become anxious when they face difficult situations such as illness, unemployment, moving house, or job interviews. Mild anxiety prior to an examination, for example, can be useful as it can make you feel more alert and enhance your performance. Mild, short-term anxiety is extremely common, however, for some people anxiety can become so extreme that it is disabling. A doctor may make a diagnosis of *generalised anxiety disorder* if a person has been experiencing a high level of tension and anxiety for several months for no clear reason. Anxiety often goes hand-in-hand with depression, making it difficult for doctors to diagnose whether an individual has depression with symptoms of anxiety, or anxiety problems that are making them depressed.

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

Anxiety can affect individuals in different ways. Some people experience anxiety primarily through psychological and emotional symptoms, whilst others may experience a wide range of physical effects. Anxiety has a certain self-perpetuating quality, because the physical symptoms of anxiety can be so distressing that they can make people even more anxious.

Psychological effects

The psychological effects of anxiety include:

- a sense of fearful anticipation
- an inability to concentrate
- irritability
- constant worrying
- heightened alertness
- getting tired easily
- sleep disturbance
- depression

Physical effects

- feelings of tightness in the chest
- chest pains
- nausea
- rapid shallow breathing
- loss of appetite
- butterfly feelings in the stomach
- headaches and dizziness
- muscle tension
- pounding heart
- faintness
- sweating
- frequent urination
- loss of interest in sex
- panic attacks

For practical information and emotional support:

SANEline:
0845 767 8000

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sanemail@sane.org.uk

Written by George Stewart
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What causes anxiety?

There is no one cause for anxiety. It varies from person to person. For some people anxiety begins after a long period of stress that has gradually built up. Other people may feel they are not in control of certain aspects of their life, and may develop a general anxiety about the future. Some people may have experienced stressful life events in the past and become anxious about encountering similar experiences in the future. Some people appear to have a genetic predisposition towards anxiety; certainly there is an increased risk of developing anxiety problems if there is a family history of anxiety.

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There is also evidence that anxiety problems can be caused by physical factors such as over-activity of the thyroid gland that controls many bodily functions. Anxiety can also be caused as a side-effect of certain drugs including commonly prescribed antidepressants. Anxiety is also a common symptom of withdrawal effects from benzodiazepine drugs such as Valium. Use of recreational drugs can also trigger episodes of anxiety.

Some people experience many of the physical effects of anxiety because of involuntary rapid, shallow breathing, called *hyperventilation* or *over-breathing*. *Hyperventilation* can trigger panic attacks; episodes of severe and sudden anxiety that can make people feel like they are having a heart attack or similar condition.

Talking treatments

Talking treatments alone can be effective in treating anxiety for some people, for others a combination of talking treatments and drug treatment may be the most effective treatment. Talking treatments aim to help people recognise the stress factors in their lives, and work out coping strategies in order to be able to deal with these. A wide variety of talking treatments are available, ranging from counselling and psychotherapy to cognitive behaviour therapy. A referral for talking treatments can be arranged by your doctor. However, frequently there are long waiting lists for these types of treatment on the NHS. Free or low-cost counselling is also provided by a number of charities and voluntary organisations, and, for those who can afford to pay, there are many private practitioners. For more information on talking treatments please see: **Psychological Methods of Treatment**

Relaxation Training

Relaxation training can reduce anxiety if you practise regularly, however, it can be difficult to find the motivation to practise alone. For this reason, relaxation training is often provided in group sessions. This treatment aims to train people to relax their muscles, to breathe slowly and deeply, and to clear the mind of worrying thoughts. After a few sessions, most people are able to relax rapidly and use this new skill at times of stress. Your therapist may provide you with a tape-recording of relaxation instructions in order that you can continue to practise at home after your formal training has ended. Some GP practices offer relaxation training groups, if not, your GP may be able to refer you to a psychology department for treatment. Some charities and voluntary organisations also offer relaxation groups and training.

Which treatment may be right for me?

Individuals respond to different treatments in different ways. What works well for one person may not work well for another. Speaking to your doctor will help you weigh up the pros and cons of the different treatments available. Your doctor should be able to provide you with information on how treatments work, how effective they are, and what side-effects you may experience. Drug treatment may be extremely effective for some people, others may find talking treatments the best option. Others may find a combination of drug treatment and talking treatments or relaxation training works best for them.

What can I do to help myself?

There are many ways in which you can help yourself cope with anxiety. It is important that you come to understand the nature of your illness, its causes and symptoms. If you can recognise the early signs of a relapse or deterioration in your mental health, you can seek help and treatment before your condition worsens.

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When you are feeling anxious, it can be difficult to see beyond the day-to-day problems in life. It can be very difficult finding the energy and motivation to actively try and help yourself. However, if you are able to take an active part in your treatment it should help your situation improve.

Self-help groups

Many people find it helpful to meet other people in a similar position. It can be very useful to share experiences with other people who may be going through the same thing you are. There are opportunities for mutual support, and you may get ideas of what things other people have found helpful to them. Above all, it is an opportunity to help you realise that you are not alone in how you are feeling.

Fighting negative attitudes

Anxiety can cause people to sink into a cycle of negative thinking. The more anxious you become, the less you are able to find the motivation to help you fight the anxiety. It can be extremely helpful if you are able to recognise patterns of negative thinking, challenge these yourself, and try and replace them with more positive, constructive thoughts.

Physical Activity

Many of the physical symptoms of anxiety can be attributed to an excess of hormones, such as adrenalin, in your system. Although it may be difficult finding the motivation to exercise, it can be very therapeutic to take part in physical activities. Jogging, swimming, sports; even brisk walking can help to use up any excess adrenalin.

Care for yourself

When you are feeling anxious it is extremely important that you care for yourself. You will feel better if you are able to eat properly, pay attention to your physical appearance, and don't abuse alcohol or drugs. Be kind to yourself, allow yourself treats, and try not to cut yourself off from other people.

Complementary therapies

The following are non-medical treatments that some people find helpful, however it is important that you discuss such treatments with your doctor first in case of any interaction with any treatment they have prescribed. Massage can help to alleviate stress and anxiety making make you feel better. Some people benefit from meditation, yoga, homeopathy and acupuncture.

What can friends and family do to help?

Supporting a friend with anxiety can be hard work and frustrating. However, it can also be immensely satisfying and an opportunity to build a closer relationship. Anxiety can make people withdraw from social situations and relationships and make them reluctant to confide in people and ask for help and support. Friends and relatives can be of great help. They can provide emotional and practical support and encourage people to seek appropriate support and treatment. Friends and family can become involved in treatment plans and, above all, make a person feel wanted, needed and loved.

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Where can I find help and support?

There is a wide a range of services available that can help provide care, support and information to people experiencing anxiety, their friends, relatives and carers. You may find some of the following useful:

SANEline / SANEmail

1st Floor Cityside House, 40 Adler Street, London, E1 1EE

helpline: 0845 767 8000

email: sanemail@sane.org.uk

web: www.sane.org.uk

SANEline and SANEmail offer emotional support and information to those experiencing mental health problems, their families and carers.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

Victoria Buildings, 9 – 13 Silver Street, Bury, BL9 0EU

tel.0161 797 4484, fax: 0161 797 2670

email: babcp@babcp.com

web: www.babcp.com

A directory of psychotherapists is available online.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire, LE17 4HB

tel. 0870 443 5252

email: bacp@bacp.co.uk

web: www.bacp.co.uk

See website for details of local practitioners.

British Psychoanalytic Council

West Hill House, 6 Swains Lane, London N6 6QS

tel. 020 7267 3626, fax: 020 7267 4772

email: mail@psychoanalytic-council.org

web: www.bcp.org.uk

A linking body of psychoanalytical psychotherapist societies.

Carers UK

20–25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JT

carers line: 0808 808 7777, tel. 020 7490 8818, fax: 020 7490 8824

email: info@carersuk.org

web: www.carersuk.org

Information and advice on all aspects of caring.

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First Steps to Freedom

PO Box 476, Newquay, TR7 1WG

helpline: 0845 120 2916

email: first.steps@byconnect.com

web: www.first-steps.org

Information and help for people with anxiety problems, 10am -10pm 7days.

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No Panic

93 Brands Farm Way, Randlay, Telford, Shropshire, TF3 2JQ
helpline: 0808 808 0545
email: ceo@nopanic.org.uk
web: www.nopanic.org.uk
Helpline for people experiencing anxiety problems, 10am -10pm 7days.

Rethink

28 Castle Street, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT1 1SS
tel. 0845 456 0455, advice line: 020 8974 6814
email: advice@rethink.org / info@rethink.org
web: www.rethink.org
Working to help people affected by severe mental illness recover a better quality of life.

Samaritans

The Upper Mill, Kingston Road, Ewell, Surrey KT17 2AF
helpline: 08457 90 90 90, fax: 020 8394 8301
email: jo@samaritans.org
web: www.samaritans.org
24-hour telephone helpline offering emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

2nd Floor Edward House, 2 Wakley Street, London, EC1V 7LT
tel. 020 7014 9955, fax: 020 7014 9977
email: info@psychotherapy.org.uk
web: www.psychotherapy.org.uk
Umbrella organisation for psychotherapy in UK. Regional lists of psychotherapists are available.

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