

Anxiety



This factsheet provides a basic description of anxiety, its symptoms and the treatments and support options available.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling that is common to us all. It is a natural reaction to certain situations and circumstances, and is characterised by a fear or apprehension of what might happen, or what the future might hold. For this reason, it is often associated with circumstances such as illness, unemployment, moving house, exams or job interviews.

This kind of anxiety is extremely common and most of us learn to manage it; it tends to pass relatively quickly; however, sometimes anxiety becomes so extreme that it is disabling and interferes with everyday life. Anxiety often goes hand-in-hand with depression, which can be difficult for individuals, and it may take time for a doctor to make a clear diagnosis and find an appropriate treatment.

As with any condition that affects individuals, anxiety may also be challenging and difficult for family, friends and colleagues. It can interfere with our ability to relate to others and to the world around us. It can be difficult for others to understand that reassurance and logic may not be comforting, or appear realistic to those experiencing deep anxiety.

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

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

Psychological effects

The psychological effects of anxiety may include:

- An overwhelming sense of fearful anticipation
- Inability to concentrate
- Constant worrying
- Heightened alertness and a tendency to 'catastrophise'
- Sleep disturbance

Physical effects

- Tightness in the chest / chest pains / pounding heart
- Nausea
- Rapid shallow breathing / butterfly feelings in the stomach
- Loss of appetite
- Headaches / dizziness / faintness
- Muscle tension

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- Sweating
- Frequent urination
- Panic attacks

What causes anxiety?

There is no one cause for anxiety. It varies from person to person. For some it may begin after a long period of stress. Others 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.

There is evidence that anxiety problems can be caused by physical factors such as an over-active thyroid gland. It can also be a side-effect of certain drugs including some commonly prescribed antidepressants and is a common symptom of withdrawal 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.

Medication

Medication in the form of tranquillisers and sleeping pills, is usually only used as a short-term measure in cases of severe anxiety. Other treatments, such as talking treatments are generally more effective in developing coping strategies to cope with anxiety.

Talking treatments (counselling / therapy)

Talking treatments can help you identify unhelpful ways of thinking and behaving, and to explore coping strategies to deal with these. CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy may be particularly helpful for anxiety as it helps you feel more in control of behaviour and thoughts and find constructive ways of dealing with difficult feelings and circumstances.

Referrals for talking treatments can be arranged by your doctor. However, there may be long waiting lists on the NHS. Free or low-cost counselling is provided by a number of charities and voluntary organisations; you can find out about options in your area by contacting SANE Services. There are also many private practitioners – you can find out more about how to find a counsellor or therapist privately from the list of organisations at the bottom of this factsheet.

Which treatment may be right for me?

Individuals respond to different treatments in different ways. Speaking to your doctor will help you weigh up the pros and cons of the different treatments available. It is important that you are as open and honest with your doctor as possible so they get a true picture of your condition. This enables them to help you most effectively.

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What can I do to help myself?

There are many ways in which you can help yourself, although initially it may be difficult as anxiety can interfere with your ability to think and make decisions. It can be really helpful if you can let someone like a friend or family member know how you are feeling and that you might need some support and encouragement to help you help yourself.

Relaxation

Relaxation can reduce anxiety. As it can be difficult to find the motivation to practice alone, relaxation training is often provided in group sessions. This trains you to relax your muscles, breathe slowly and deeply, and clear your mind of worrying thoughts.

After a few sessions, most people are able to relax rapidly and use this new skill at times of stress. You may be provided with a tape-recording of instructions to help you continue to practice 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 – you can find out about such options by contacting SANE Services.

Self-help groups

Many people find it helpful to meet and 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 for them. Above all, it is an opportunity to help you realise that you are not alone in how you are feeling.

You can find out about self-help groups in your area by contacting SANE Services.

Support forums

If there is no self-help group in your area, or if you find getting out of the house, or meeting people difficult, you might like to join an internet forum such as SANE's Support Forum. This enables you to make contact with other people, share your experiences with them, and give and receive support in a way that may feel more comfortable.

Dealing with negative thoughts

As anxiety focuses on fears about what may happen, or about consequences of actions or inactions, it can lead to a cycle of negative thinking, and it can be very hard to comprehend a different reality.

If you can let friends and family know how you are thinking they can help by holding a more positive picture of you and the world, and reflecting this back to you. This may not relieve feelings of acute anxiety, but it can help to remind you that your experience is not necessarily a reflection of objective reality, and that there is something to reach for and hope for when your feelings of anxiety subside.

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Physical activity

Being active can be very therapeutic, although anxiety initially may interfere with your ability to make a decision, or make getting out of the house difficult, so you may need some help and encouragement. Friends and family can help, perhaps by offering to go for a walk with you, or to encourage you to continue with physical activity if this has been part of your normal routine.

If your chosen activity involves some social contact, this may enable you to interact with others in a way that feels more comfortable than perhaps a purely 'social' interaction.

Caring for yourself

This may feel difficult, particularly if anxiety is linked to depression. However, some of the symptoms of anxiety such as sweating and perspiration may leave your clothes or bedclothes feeling stale and uncomfortable.

Having a shower and arranging to have fresh clothes and a spare set of fresh bedclothes available can help you feel better and more comfortable. Encouragement from friends and family can help you to establish these routines.

Where can I find help and support?

SANE provides emotional support to anyone affected by mental health problems, including families, friends and carers.

One-to-one support:

- Helpline: 0845 767 8000 (6pm – 11pm)
- Email: http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/email/

Peer support:

- Support Forum: http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/supportforum/

Details can be found on our website at www.sane.org.uk