

Anxiety and panic attacks

Information for individuals, partners and families

It is normal to feel anxious or worried in situations that we see as threatening.

In fact, a certain level of anxiety can be helpful in making us prepare for important events such as exams or job interviews, or by helping us escape from dangerous situations.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it lasts a long time, becomes overwhelming, or affects the way we live our day to day lives.

Problems with anxiety are common, affecting around 1 in 10 of us at some point in our lives. In fact, mixed anxiety and depression is the most common mental health problem in the UK. People of all ages and backgrounds can experience problems with anxiety.

Anxiety symptoms

People who have problems with anxiety may experience number of different psychological and physical symptoms:

Physical Symptoms

- Muscle tension
- Light headedness
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Hyperventilating
- Nausea

Psychological Symptoms

- Feeling worried
- Fearing the worst
- Feeling irritable
- Finding it difficult to concentrate

Everyone experiences anxiety differently. There may be feelings or physical symptoms listed here that you have never experienced. On the other hand, you may have experienced anxiety in ways other than these.

Anxiety disorders

For some people, feeling anxious is a symptom of an anxiety disorder. Some of the most common of these are:

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD): Feeling anxious for a long time about nothing specific. The feelings are often overwhelming and they may stop you from doing things you would like to do.

Panic disorder: Experiencing panic attacks that may come out of the blue. This can cause fear of having more panic attacks and make you avoid certain situations.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD): Anxiety leads to obsessions (repeated unwanted thoughts) and compulsions (repetitive behaviours or mental acts). These obsessions and compulsions can stop you from living a normal life.

Phobias: An intense fear of something specific. The feared object or situation is usually harmless. A phobia will often make you go to great lengths to avoid the feared situation.



Panic attacks

A panic attack is an intense rush of psychological and physical symptoms that comes on suddenly.

Experiencing a panic attack can be very frightening and uncomfortable. Panic attacks cause an overwhelming sense of fear, as well as physical sensations such as nausea, sweating and trembling. It is common to feel as though you can't breathe, that you are choking, or as though your heart is beating too fast.

Panic attacks usually last between 5 and 20 minutes, with a peak at about 10 minutes. During a panic attack it is common to fear that you are dying or losing control.

Getting help

If you think that you or someone close to you are experiencing problems with anxiety that have not resolved themselves, speak to a GP or other health professional.



Treatments for Anxiety

Anxiety might feel like it will never go away, but in most cases it does get better with the right treatment.

Lifestyle changes are usually the first thing to try. Getting more exercise, eating healthily and sleeping well can help you feel much less anxious and more able to cope.

Using self-help tools can be a useful next step. Many of these are available as workbooks or as internet-based programmes. These can often be prescribed by your doctor.

Talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) have been found to be effective for the treatment of anxiety.

CBT is a treatment that helps change the way a person thinks and behaves. It identifies unhelpful ways of thinking and can help to break the cycle of negative thoughts.

In moderate to severe cases, medication may be required. Many people find them effective, but they can have drawbacks. Some people experience unpleasant side effects, and they can take several weeks to work.

A combination of lifestyle changes, talking therapies and medication is often the most effective way to treat anxiety.

Tips for people with anxiety

- Take some time out every day to do something relaxing, such as listening to music, gardening, or going for a walk.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to calm yourself down when you are feeling anxious. These can make symptoms worse and can interfere with any medication you may be taking.
- Look after yourself. Getting enough sleep and eating a healthy diet can help you feel better.
- You may find it helpful to keep a diary to monitor how you feel and to identify possible triggers of anxiety and panic attacks.
- Stick to your usual routines. Set yourself small daily goals and reward yourself for what you achieve.
- It may be tempting to withdraw from social activities and stay at home. This will not help in the long run. It is important to stay engaged with other people and to try and keep doing the things you enjoy.
- Talking to someone you trust about how you feel can be helpful, and may make it easier for you to talk to your GP.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help. Make an appointment with a GP. There are lots of different treatments available that may help you feel better.

Tips for families, partners and carers

- One of the best ways to help a person with anxiety is to listen to their worries. Try to be patient and understanding.
- Avoid being judgmental or telling them to 'snap out of it'.
- Anxious people can sometimes be irritable or difficult to deal with. Try to be patient and not to take their reactions personally.
- Encourage the person having problems to stick to normal routines. Help them to establish small daily goals and recognise each success.
- If someone you care about is feeling very anxious, encourage them to get help rather than dealing with it by themselves. A good place to start is by discussing things with a GP.

Useful websites

Royal College of Psychiatrists

This site provides a detailed patient information leaflet about anxiety as well as other mental health information. Search 'anxiety' from the homepage.

rcpsych.ac.uk

Mind

Information and support along with downloadable leaflets and real people's stories. Search 'anxiety' from the homepage.

mind.org.uk

Samaritans

Available 24 hours a day to provide confidential emotional support for people experiencing feelings of distress and finding it difficult to cope.

samaritans.org

Help with our anxiety disorders research

The National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) is working to better understand mental health problems including anxiety disorders. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment and support for the future.

But to do this, we need **your** help.

Helping with our research is quick and painless, and all information we collect is stored confidentially. Taking part involves:

- a brief meeting with one of our trained researchers, either at your home or in a local clinic
- providing a small blood or saliva sample
- completing and returning some questionnaires.

For more information about our research and how you can help, visit our website (www.ncmh.info) or contact us:



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