

Coping with anxiety



What is anxiety?

Anxiety as a feeling is a completely normal and natural emotional response of our threat system to anything that is a potential danger to us (whether that threat is a real thing in front of us, or an image or thought in our mind). We all feel anxious sometimes and much of the time it is helpful. For example, anxiety helps us run fast when we need to get out of the way of a speeding car, it keeps our mind focused and alert when we are in an unfamiliar or unsafe place, it motivates us to work hard when we have an upcoming deadline – and once the threat has passed, the anxiety goes away.

But sometimes people find they get stuck in feeling excessively or consistently anxious and worrying a great deal which gets in the way of living life as fully as they want to. This is when we might consider if someone has an anxiety “disorder” (i.e. a level of distress and difficulty that would meet diagnostic criteria for a condition).

There are lots of different types of anxiety disorders that include social anxiety, panic disorder, phobias, generalised anxiety disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder.

What causes anxiety disorders?

Like all mental health problems, anxiety disorders are caused by a combination of different factors including an individual's genes, the influences of their early life experience, the stressful events going on for them right now and their internal coping style.

The triggers for anxiety can be different for different people but they are often preceded by a stressful or traumatic life event (e.g. bullying, academic failure, assault or abuse).

What is the cycle of anxiety?

One of the hardest things about anxiety is the way the negative thoughts and feelings can create a vicious cycle which keeps the anxiety going.

The natural response of our threat system makes us want to run away, hide or avoid the situation that causes us anxiety, but unfortunately the more we do this, the more we confirm to ourselves that this is a real danger, and so the stronger the anxiety becomes.

When someone is anxious their thinking pattern becomes dominated by frightening or worried thoughts about themselves, their future and the world around them. These thoughts naturally make someone feel anxious, panicky and stressed. These thoughts and emotions have a physical impact on the body, making people feel tense, having increased heart rate and breathing, sweating, feeling hot and cold and shaking. These are natural, automatic physical responses of our threat system, preparing the body for 'fight or flight'.



All these difficult thoughts, feelings and sensations in the body push the person towards three types of responses, which are:

Avoidance

This includes complete avoidance such as not going out or not doing certain activities which are anxiety-provoking to smaller scale acts of avoidance like not speaking as much in social situations, avoiding eye contact or changing the subject if people ask about something you find worrying

Safety behaviours

These are things a person might do that make them feel safe in the moment, but actually do not make a difference to their safety for example seeking reassurance from other people, needing to have certain things with you in order to feel safe or repeatedly checking or cleaning things

Worry and overthinking

The mind gets pulled into trying to predict threats and rehearse future scenarios, or reruns, dissects and analyses events that have happened in the past, or might simply ask endless 'what if....?' or 'why....?' questions that often have no answers.

Although all of these responses are natural reactions to anxiety, the tricky thing is that the more a person behaves in these ways the more it confirms in their minds that the things they are worried about are real threats that must be avoided, and so, actually magnifies and strengthens the anxious thoughts and feelings. In this way people get trapped in a vicious cycle of anxiety.



What can I do to cope with my anxiety?

There are a range of things you can do to help deal with anxiety, all of them work to tackle the vicious cycle by acting in the opposite direction to the way the negative thoughts and feelings of anxiety push you.

Exercise

Being more active or taking exercise can really help to tackle the tense energy of anxiety, as well as boost self-esteem and give you a sense of accomplishment.



Breathing and meditation

Anxious feelings are driven by the threat system which causes us to breath with short, shallow breaths (called 'hyperventilating'). If you practice breathing exercises regularly you can learn to slow down and deepen your breaths and by doing this you will calm the threat centre and reduce the intensity of the anxious feelings. Meditation is an excellent way to learn this skill but you can also find lots of simple breathing exercises online.

Feel the fear and do it anyway

The most important part of tackling anxiety is to take on the avoidance and safety behaviours. Set yourself small, manageable daily goals that get you to do the things you usually avoid and encourage yourself to do them even if the anxiety tells you not to. This is key to breaking the vicious cycle as every time you achieve any small goal it will chip away at the strength and power the anxiety has, and in its place your confidence and sense of control will increase.

Get professional support

Anxiety is treatable, and there are a number of talking therapies as well as some medications that have proven effective for different anxiety disorders. Discussing your options with a mental health professional can help you decide what treatment you feel will work best for you.

