

Anxiety: General Awareness, Management and Self-care

Anxiety is an experience that has physical, emotional, behavioural and thought changes associated with it. These changes are a part of the human response of “flight, fight or freeze”, a biologically-adaptive function aimed at keeping us alive in the face of adversity. Our biology though was designed with the era of sabre-toothed tigers in mind, we modern-day humans are the ones who have changed the context.



Anxiety is like having a built-in “smoke alarm” letting us know that there is a threat/danger around and where we need to take physical action to save ourselves from that danger. Great when the action meets the need. Problems occur, however, when we feel anxious for no apparent reason or where there is only the perception of danger or no real danger present, i.e. when the “smoke alarm” is in the wrong place. Imagine putting a smoke alarm in the kitchen instead of in the hallway of a house - it would go off every time you cooked something with no actual fire happening. Anxiety is something that everyone experiences, it can be like a friend in your life letting you know that something is “up” and that you need to take action. However, it is not meant to be experienced on an ongoing basis to the point where it has a negative impact on our lives. If this is the case, understanding it and taking action to reduce this is needed.

NB: Everyone can take steps to manage anxiety better and it is highly beneficial for our mind and body, and our lived experience, to do so.



Common causes

While the exact nature of the response will differ from individual to individual, common causes of anxiety for everyone includes things from home and work:

- Stress resulting from work, home, personal issues
- Emotional trauma
- Financial concerns
- Stress caused by a chronic or serious medical condition
- Major life events such as death in the family, divorce, retirement
- Job insecurity
- Daily hassles like traffic jams, social media, emails
- Side effect of certain medications
- Alcohol consumption, drugs such as cocaine
- Lack of oxygen

Too much ongoing anxiety can deplete our energy and resilience and interfere with how we cope with stressors that we usually manage well when not feeling just as anxious. It is easy to focus on both the physical sensations that are usually very uncomfortable and the negative automatic thoughts that arise. This focus can lead us to do unhelpful things/behaviours or stay in an anxious state rather than returning to a relaxed state. Common examples of these sensations and thoughts include:

Thoughts:

- Something bad is going to happen
- I won't be able to cope
- I'm useless/they'll think I'm useless
- I feel really bad, so things are bad
- No-one wants me on their team
- I will lose my job

Emotions:

- Fearful
- Overwhelmed
- Sad
- Angry and argumentative
- Concerned

Body reaction:

You might notice in your body:

- Heart rate increases
- Breathing speeds up, breathless, choking feeling
- Muscles tense, aching, shaking
- Hot, sweating
- Lightheaded, blurred vision
- Butterflies in tummy, urge to go to toilet
- More alert - unable to settle

These are due to the adrenaline response - body's alarm system - energised for fight or flight, when blood is diverted to the big muscles to help us escape or fight the threat, and blood is therefore taken away from other body systems, e.g. digestion

Behavioural:

- Avoid the situation ("escape/flight")/take sick days
- Snap at or argue with others ("fight") at work and/or home
- Comfort eat or under eat
- Over-talk or say nothing at all
- Fidget, chew lips, bite nails, pick at skin etc
- Scanning for danger
- Find it hard to concentrate on work tasks, miss deadlines or make more errors
- Sleeping difficulties resulting in low energy and mood, which then makes you fatigued at work and unable to concentrate and performance suffers
- Worry - trapped in a cycle of negative thinking that gets you nowhere



View video: [Working with Anxiety](#).

Managing Anxiety Better

It is time to manage anxiety more effectively and you will see from the video that we can all do this. There are many things that we can do to help manage our anxiety and reduce the impact of it in our lives. These mostly relate to what we think and what we do. Self management and self-care are so empowering and easier than you think to practice and build into normal everyday life and the workplace. We must also recognise our emotions, understand why they have arisen, know that they will subside and that we can actively engage with techniques to manage these better.

Think of someone you know who you think handles difficult situations and life stressors well. No matter how bad things get, they seem to remain calm and have a positive outlook. Why do you think this is so? While a little of this is down to personality factors, most of it is down to that individual having learned how to deal with anxiety, not focusing on or ruminating about the worries or problems but instead understanding them and their own reaction to them better, followed by adopting a solution-focused approach to dealing with them. They do what they can do personally, ask for help if needed and accept what they are unable to control.




Thinking differently

We can all start to catch our anxious thoughts as they happen and work at reframing them and gaining an alternative, better perspective:

- What am I reacting to? Is this fact or opinion? Am I getting things out of proportion?
- What is it that I think is going to happen here?
- What is the worst (and best) that could happen? What is most likely to happen?
- What would someone else/a friend say about this?
- What would I say to a friend in this situation?
- Am I underestimating my ability to cope?
- What would be a more helpful way of looking at things?
- Is there another way of dealing with this? What would be the most helpful and effective action to take? (for me, for the situation, for others)

Tell yourself: Just because I think these thoughts and I feel bad, it doesn't mean things really are bad. I can cope with these feelings; I've got through this before. This will pass.



Doing differently

We can all choose our behaviour in any given or difficult situation rather than react and perhaps regret our actions later. We can choose to build regular activities into our lives that give us a break, help us destress and enable us to calm the anxious mind:

- **Pause, take a breath**
- **Don't react automatically**
- **Problem solve or make plans if necessary**
- **Take things slowly or gradually**
- **Don't avoid situations – take action with support if necessary**
- **Focus attention outside of yourself – external rather than internal focus, use distraction**
- **What's the best thing to do; what would help most?**
- **Who can help me with this – partner, colleague, line manager?**



Additional activities to deal with the physical sensations of anxiety

Since the anxiety response is meant to be followed by movement, using that energy healthily:

- Practice calming breathing - this one act alone will help reduce the physical sensations, emotions and intensity of thoughts - breathing exercise
- Visualisation: Breathe in blue (for calm) and breathe out red
- Go for a walk, run or cycle, or maybe do some gardening or housework/hobby
- Listen to some music that makes you feel good and lifts your mood
- Build self-care into your life – take some time to relax and do something every day that feels good
- Spend time in nature, even if it is just in the garden

Visualise yourself successfully coping with the situation that you feel anxious about. See it through to a successful completion.



Note: Experiencing occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. However, people with anxiety disorders frequently have intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear about work and/or everyday situations. Speak to someone at home, work or a GP if this is you. Also, should you experience any suicidal thoughts, speak to your GP or another trusted person immediately. See the [support page](#) for details of organisations that can help.

For members, Anxiety and Stress Management exercises [here](#) (mindful breathing, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, stretching to relieve neck/shoulder muscle tension, thinking and doing differently)

