

Anxiety and panic

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotional and physiological response to feeling threatened, ranging from mild uneasiness and worry to severe panic. It is not unusual to feel anxious when in a stressful situation but not all anxiety is negative. It can be exciting or invigorating, helping to motivate us to get things done. If anxiety becomes too severe or chronic, though, it can be debilitating.

We experience anxiety in different ways:

Psychologically (emotionally)

Fear, nervousness, not being able to concentrate, feeling numb

Physiologically (physically)

Breathing fast, trembling, dry mouth, heart racing, stomach churning

Cognitively (thinking)

Frightening or negative thoughts e.g. I'm going to fail/ make a fool of myself/ lose control

These can affect our behaviour by causing us to put off or stop work, avoiding people or situations, not sleeping, not eating or eating for comfort, drinking too much or taking illegal substances.

Too much stress can interfere with living a normal life, although acute anxiety states are time-limited and will start to fade away in a relatively short period of time. Even when anxiety is intense, you can still probably function better than you expect, with others being unaware of how you are feeling.

How you can help yourself

Review the stressful circumstances in your life

Think about what causes you to feel stressed and try to find ways to reduce these sources of stress. For example:

- learn to say no to things you don't want to do
- give up unnecessary, time-consuming activities and responsibilities
- talk to your tutor, supervisor or manager about work problems
- discuss a relationship problem
- use a realistic plan of action to tackle projects
- ask for information or feedback, if helpful.

Acknowledge what feels right for you and allow yourself to respond to your needs. Looking after your emotional wellbeing will help you cope with stress:

- eat well, be physically active, get enough sleep, be social
- have a support network around you - spending time with friends or family
- do activities you enjoy
- develop your emotional resilience.

Challenge negative thoughts

Anxious thoughts cause us to exaggerate how threatening a situation is and underplay how effectively we can cope. Our thoughts are distorted by our emotional state, and it can help to evaluate the situation more realistically when we feel calm. Ask yourself:

Am I judging myself harshly?

Are you focusing on failures and forgetting your successes? Dismissing similar situations in the past that you have coped with?

Am I catastrophising?

Are you seeing things in all-or-nothing terms, or assuming that to not succeed would be an absolute catastrophe? Exaggerating the chance of something going wrong or minimising the possibility of your working it out fine?

Am I worrying about the future?

Are you making assumptions about what will happen in the future? Frightening yourself about situations that you aren't actually facing at present, and which may never happen?

Am I comparing myself to others?

Are you assuming that everyone else is doing fine, when you don't actually know how others are feeling or managing? Blaming yourself for things that you cannot control, or are not your responsibility?

Try using your rational mind to challenge your irrational thinking. For example:

Irrational: "I'll make a fool of myself in front of all these new people and they won't like me."

Rational: "A lot of people will be feeling anxious like me. If I try to be friendly and pleasant, people have responded well to that in the past."

Irrational: "I'm going to fail my exams."

Rational: "I've been doing some revision and I've done OK with the course work. The work is supposed to be more challenging. I've passed exams before."

Distract yourself

Some people find it more effective to distract themselves from their frightening thoughts, such as by repeating a calming phrase e.g. 'Stay calm and relaxed. I will feel better soon', or by doing mental arithmetic or saying the alphabet backwards. You can also try to distract yourself by focusing your attention on some external stimulus such as listening to a conversation, watching television, or becoming aware of what is going on around you. If you can stop attending to frightening thoughts, they won't be able to fuel your anxiety.

Face the situation

Confronting anxiety-provoking situations rather than avoiding them can help. If you let yourself stay in the feared situation for long enough, the anxiety will reduce over time until it goes. You might start by confronting a situation that is not too demanding so that you experience the resultant reduction in anxiety, and gradually address more anxiety-provoking situations.

Learn to relax

The physical symptoms of anxiety occur because adrenaline is released by the nervous system into the blood stream. Relaxation and breathing exercises can help you to control these symptoms. You can learn how your body feels when it is relaxed if you tense different parts of your body (e.g. arms, hands, legs, neck, shoulders, forehead) for a few seconds, and then allow them to relax. Try to keep your breathing slow and regular so that you do not hyperventilate, as this makes the physical symptoms worse.

Relaxation exercises need to be practised initially when calm – you will become better able to relax in stressful situations with increasing practice.

PANIC ATTACKS

A panic attack is a severe experience of anxiety. It is your body's normal, if exaggerated response, to a stressful situation. You may feel intense dread, experience various physical symptoms (not feeling able to breathe, dizziness, chest pains, trembling, sweating, etc.) and have extreme thoughts of losing control, going mad, having a heart attack or dying. Although panic attacks can be very frightening, they are not actually harmful - people do not have heart attacks, develop psychiatric illnesses or die from them – and will pass.

If you have a panic attack:

- Remember that a panic attack will end and is not dangerous.
- Remind yourself about previous occasions when you handled a similar situation well.
- Let your feelings be just as they are; they will become less intense this way.
- Instead of thinking about what might happen (which could generate more frightening thoughts), focus on the present and be aware of the things around you – observe their shape, colour, sounds ...

- Stop what you are doing and slow yourself down for a moment. Breathe more slowly and gently (though not actually holding your breath). Then continue what you were doing slowly.
- Picture someone offering you calm encouragement.
- Take a big sigh, stretch out, and then flop and relax.
- If you are able, take some gentle exercise e.g. go for a stroll.

It can be helpful to keep a log of panic attacks (e.g. to note what happens beforehand, when and where each happens, your thoughts) as this may help identify possible triggers.

When to seek further help

- If the anxiety problems do not start to improve despite trying the ideas above.
- If your fears are persistent and difficult to control.
- If your anxiety is stopping you from living a normal life, or if you are avoiding important activities.