

How to
manage
your fear and
anxiety



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How to manage your fear and anxiety



Feeling anxious or afraid is something we all experience from time to time.

It's normal to feel worried sometimes, such as when managing work pressures, exam stress, money problems, and relationship issues.

But when anxiety and fear become long-term or take over your life it can affect your wellbeing.

This guide explains:

- 1** Where anxiety and fear come from
- 2** How anxiety and fear can affect you
- 3** Ways to cope
- 4** Where to seek support

What is fear?

Fear is one of the most powerful emotions we can experience.

It's a human response that is vital for our survival, helping us respond to emergencies or dangerous situations, such as fires and attacks.

Fear can also occur in everyday, non-life-threatening events, such as exams, public speaking, job interviews, dates, or even social events such as parties.

It's a natural reaction to events that put you under pressure.



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is when we experience fear or dread about something going wrong in the present as well as the future.

Anxiety can last for a short time, passing when what was causing you to worry is over, but it can also last much longer and disrupt your life. Ongoing anxiety can cause fear and avoidance of situations that could trigger worry.

Mental Health Foundation research in 2023 found that nearly three-quarters of the population (73%) had felt anxious at least sometimes in the previous two weeks, with 20% anxious most or all of the time.¹

This ongoing fear can disrupt your ability to sleep, eat, and concentrate. It can even prevent you from doing things you want or need to do, such as schoolwork, work tasks, travelling, or socialising with friends.

It can be hard to break the cycle of anxiety, but there are lots of ways to manage it so that it doesn't stop you from living.



When anxiety holds you back from enjoying life, it can affect your mental health. For instance, people with anxiety may be more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression, chronic stress, and loneliness.²

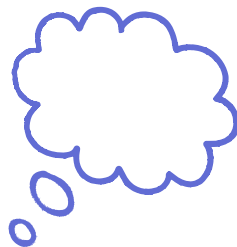
What causes fear?

Lots of things can make us feel afraid.

Sometimes, fear can keep us safe, such as helping us flee from dangerous situations like fires. But, for many people, fear of something going wrong in everyday situations can prevent them from living a full life.

What we're afraid of and how we react when afraid can be different from person to person. However, understanding what makes you afraid and why is the first step to overcoming anxiety.

What causes anxiety?



Anxiety is a type of fear we feel around things such as health, finances, relationships, or even past or future events.³

While many fears are temporary, and pass when the worrisome event is over, anxiety can last for a long time and occur without a clear cause. When we feel anxious, we may worry about something going wrong in the present or future – or even about things that went wrong in the past.

The reason why anxiety feels like fear is because the underlying emotion is very similar, and feeling like this often can affect our relationships, ability to work or study, and overall wellbeing.

What does anxiety and fear feel like?



When you feel frightened or seriously anxious, your mind and body work very quickly.

These are some of the things that might happen:

- your heart beats quickly or irregularly
- you breathe very fast or feel short of breath
- your muscles feel weak or tense
- you get hot or cold sweats
- you feel frozen to the spot
- your stomach feels nauseous or upset
- you feel numb or dizzy
- you find it hard to concentrate on anything else
- you can't eat
- you get a dry mouth

These feelings happen because your body, sensing a threat to your wellbeing, is preparing you for an emergency. It responds by making your blood flow to the muscles, increasing blood sugar, and giving you the mental ability to concentrate on what it sees as a threat.

With long-term anxiety, you may have some of the symptoms listed above, but also a constant, nagging sense of unease.

As a result, you might feel irritable, have trouble sleeping, develop headaches, and struggle to concentrate on work or study. These issues can also affect self-confidence and the ability to be sexually intimate, potentially affecting close relationships.⁴

Why do I feel anxious without danger?

Early humans needed the fast, powerful responses that fear causes, as they were often confronted by real, physical danger. However, modern life typically doesn't present the same types of threat.

Yet, our minds and bodies are still wired to work in the same ways as our early ancestors. It's just that the nature of threats has changed. Instead, we respond in physical and emotional ways to worries such as paying the bills, work difficulties, and social situations.

But we can't run away from or physically attack these problems!



The physical feelings of fear can be scary in themselves – especially if you don't know why you're experiencing them or if they seem out of proportion to the situation.

Instead of alerting you to a danger and preparing you to respond to it, your fear or anxiety can kick in for any perceived threat, regardless of how minor it is.

This response can cause you more problems than whatever triggered the reaction in the first place.

Why won't my fear go away?

Fear may be a one-off feeling when you are faced with something unfamiliar. But it can also be an everyday, long-lasting problem – even if you're unsure why.

Some people feel a constant sense of anxiety all the time, without any particular trigger. This means it can be difficult to work out why you feel frightened or how likely something is to go wrong.

Even if you're aware of how out of proportion a fear is, the emotional part of your brain keeps sending danger signals to your body. If fear is affecting your life, mental and physical ways of coping with anxiety can help.

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is when you feel overwhelmed by physical and mental feelings of fear – including the signs listed under 'What do fear and anxiety feel like?'

People who have panic attacks might say that they're finding it hard to breathe, or that they're worried they're having a heart attack or are losing control of their bodies.

If you experience symptoms like these, it can help to speak to a healthcare professional as soon as possible to ensure there are no other underlying causes.

See the 'Support and information' section at the end of this booklet if you need help with panic attacks.

Types of anxiety

The type of anxiety someone has can cause them to worry about or fear different things.

Some of the most common types of anxiety are listed below, and it's also normal to experience symptoms of more than one.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

GAD is when you feel very worried about lots of things and these feelings seem out of your control.

GAD can affect daily life, as its symptoms include:

- difficulty sleeping
- feeling irritable and tired
- concentration problems
- fast beating heart
- low mood⁵

Health anxiety

Constantly worrying about being ill, or becoming ill, is another form of anxiety.

Health anxiety can take over your life as it can cause you to frequently check your body for signs of sickness, act as though you are ill, or seek constant reassurance that you're okay from sources such as doctors or online.⁷



Social anxiety

Social anxiety is much more than just shyness; it's an intense fear of social situations. This fear may begin at a young age and continue into adulthood, having a big influence on your life. You may have social anxiety if you:

- worry a lot before, during, or after a social activity
- avoid socialising due to fear
- feel like you're being watched or criticised by others
- experience physical symptoms when socialising, such as sweating, trembling, or upset stomach⁶

Phobias

A phobia is an extreme fear of a particular animal, thing, place, or situation.

If you have a phobia, the thought of coming into contact with the cause of your fear might make you very anxious – or even result in a panic attack.

For this reason, people with phobias usually have an overwhelming need to avoid the source of their fear, often affecting everyday life.⁸

How to manage fear and anxiety

Fear or anxiety is something we may all experience every so often. However, when these issues become severe or long-lasting, they can affect mental health and wellbeing.

If you feel anxious all the time for several weeks, like your fears or phobias are taking over your life, or you're experiencing panic attacks, it may be a good idea to talk to your doctor for advice. Alternatively, try one of the websites or numbers listed at the end of this booklet.



How can I help myself?

Speaking to a mental health professional for support and advice may be the best way to manage long-term or severe anxiety.

In the meantime, there are practical and effective steps you can take right now to cope with your fears.



Understand what you're feeling and why

Recognising your fears and where they come from is a great start to learning how to overcome them. You can do so by paying attention to and writing down how you're feeling.

When you notice yourself feeling a certain way, try to write down a name for the emotion. For instance, do you feel concerned, scared, or nervous?

Can you trace this feeling back to a certain trigger, such as who you were with, where you were, or something that was said? What thoughts went through your mind after this trigger?

When we pinpoint a trigger and our thoughts around it, we can reduce anxiety by challenging our beliefs and replacing with more accurate ones.

For example, you could replace a thought like 'I'm going to say or do something stupid,' with 'I've done this successfully lots of times.'



We've provided a simple worksheet for completing this exercise on the next page.



Thought exercise



This exercise can help you understand and manage anxious thoughts and feelings. Thought exercises are often used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a common therapy used for anxiety.

Situation

What happened to make you feel anxious?

E.g. I made a mistake at work



Thoughts

What negative thoughts did this situation bring up?

E.g. My colleague is judging me



Feelings

How does this make you feel?

E.g. Uneasy, tense muscles

What supports your thoughts?

What evidence supports your thoughts?

E.g. My colleague didn't email me back today



What contradicts your thoughts?

What evidence doesn't support your thoughts?

E.g. My colleague is usually kind



Alternative thoughts

Can you re-frame your thoughts in a more positive way?

E.g. It's okay to make mistakes, people will understand



New perspective

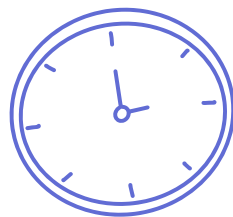
How do you think and feel about the situation now?

E.g. I made a mistake that I can learn from today

If you're interested in CBT for anxiety, visit the NHS 'Talking Therapies' webpage or speak to your GP.



Manage your anxiety in the moment



Fear and anxiety can stop us in our tracks and make coping with daily tasks next to impossible. If you notice the physical or mental signs of anxiety starting to build, you could try to prevent them from taking over by managing them in the moment.

A one-minute mindfulness exercise could help you reduce anxiety as these allow you to reset your mind and body.

You can do this by finding a comfortable place to sit or stand, bringing your attention to the feelings in your body, and how these feelings change as you concentrate on your breathing.

Another useful way to manage your anxiety in the moment is to keep a list of statements or reminders about yourself at hand. Make these statements meaningful to you, for instance, 'I feel fearful, but it doesn't define who I am as a person.'

One minute mindfulness exercise to do at home

The mindfulness body scan is an opportunity to bring yourself back to the present moment and attune yourself to the needs of your mind and body.

Create a comfortable space at home or step outside to a quiet environment like a park or in a car. You may want to put on some music or wear headphones to cancel out any additional noise.

The instructions (right) can be done in your own time.



Let's begin...

- 1** Close your eyes and begin scanning your body.
- 2** Start with your feet and slowly bring awareness up through the body. Scan all the way to your hands and head.
- 3** What sensations do you feel? Heaviness in the legs? Strain in the back? Perhaps no sensations at all. Be sure to take a moment to let these sensations arise, they may not be so obvious at first.
- 4** Once you've given yourself a moment, start to move your awareness out of your body and become aware of the space around you again.

Face your fear if you can

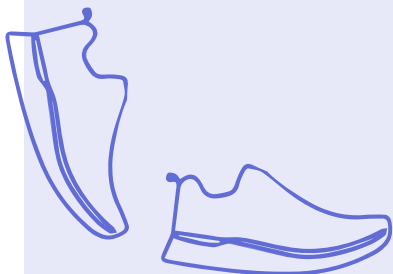
Constantly avoiding situations that scare you may prevent you from doing the things you want or need to do – making you miss out on life and opportunities for growth. Anxiety can increase if this pattern develops, as you don't have the chance to test your fears and whether the situation is as bad as you expect it to be.

Setting yourself small, achievable goals for facing your fears can be an effective way to manage anxiety.

For example, if you have social anxiety, you could reduce your discomfort by starting with small tasks such as smiling at strangers in passing. Then, as your comfort levels increase, you could practice saying 'hello,' before building up to asking questions or even starting a conversation.

After you complete each step in reducing your fear, you could write down what went well and how the reality of the situation compared to your worries.

Physical activity



The body and mind are connected, so even short bursts of movement, such as a ten-minute walk can reduce anxiety. Exercise also boosts 'feel good' chemicals in the brain, improving mood and taking your mind off your fears.⁹

Remember, activity doesn't have to be vigorous; gentle stretches, seated exercises, or walking are all good for you and can improve anxiety. Our guide on [boosting your mood by moving more](#) can help.

Talk to a trusted friend or family member

It's normal to feel ashamed of or judge ourselves for fears or anxieties. But this can lead us to hide what's going on from those we are close to.

Feeling anxious is normal, your body and mind's attempt to protect you from harm, and you don't have to struggle alone. If you have a friend or family member you feel confident will respond in a supportive way, perhaps consider opening up to them about what's going on. The act of talking about something can help reduce your anxiety levels and encourage you to seek more support if needed.

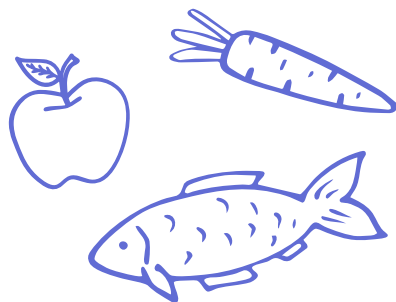
If you feel nervous about speaking to a loved one, you could prepare for the conversation ahead of time. For example, some people find it helpful to write down a few sentences or a 'script' around what they want to say, such as 'I have been feeling really worried about things for a long time, and I'd like to tell you how it's affecting me. It would help to know I have your support.'



If the thought of starting the conversation feels like too much, or you're worried about the other person's reaction, you could write an email or note for them to read ahead of time.



Healthy eating



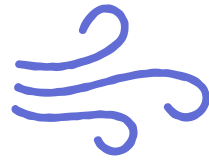
We're all familiar with the saying 'You are what you eat,' but we may not recognise how much our diets can affect anxiety.

Caffeine can lead to feelings of nervousness and a high-sugar diet can cause blood sugar to drop and make you feel anxious. So, try to avoid eating a lot of sugar or drinking too much tea and coffee.

To boost your mood naturally, you could eat foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, whole grains, and magnesium – so plenty of fruits and vegetables. Try to eat regularly to stop your blood sugar levels from dipping and make you feel tired or bad tempered.

For more information on a healthy diet, visit the [NHS Eatwell guide](#).

Find ways to relax



When we're anxious, we may not realise that we're not taking any 'downtime,' and wind up increasing our worries.

Finding ways to relax can be an enjoyable method of reducing fears.

Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or mindfulness meditation can help you cope with the mental and physical feelings of fear.

5Ws mindfulness exercise

This exercise is a simple way to tune out from your feelings and into your environment.

You can do so by listing...

1. Five things you can see.
2. Four things you touch.
3. Three things you can hear.
4. Two things you can smell.
5. One thing you can taste.

4-7-8 breathing technique

Close your mouth and quietly breathe in through your nose, counting to four in your head.

Hold your breath and count to seven. Breathe out through your mouth, making a whoosh sound while counting to eight.

Repeat three more times for a total of four breath cycles.



Avoid alcohol, or drink in moderation

It's very normal for people to drink when they feel fearful or stressed.

Some people call alcohol 'Dutch courage', but as alcohol is a depressant, its after-effects can make you feel even more afraid or anxious.

Alcohol can even lead to what many people call 'hangxiety.'

Our publication on [how to manage and reduce stress](#) offers healthy ways of coping with stress.

What causes 'hangxiety'?

Alcohol can worsen anxiety as, once its effects wear off, the brain has to adjust and we might worry about things we said or did when drinking.

We might also feel dehydrated, tired, and have low blood sugar – all of which can lead to feelings of fear.¹⁰

Faith/spirituality

If you are religious or spiritual, this can give you a way of feeling connected to something bigger than yourself.

Faith can provide a way of coping with everyday stress and attending places of worship and other faith groups can connect you with a valuable support network.





Seeking professional help

Talking therapies

Talking therapies have been proven to be very effective in helping people cope with anxiety problems. Depending on the symptoms and causes of your fears and worries, your GP may recommend one of the following talking therapies.

Psychodynamic therapy

Psychodynamic therapy can also help people cope with their fears as it deals with the underlying causes rather than just the symptoms of anxiety.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT is the most commonly used talking therapy for anxiety as it helps people to identify their fearful thoughts and challenge them through activities.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)

MBCT is effective in treating anxiety as it combines the power of talking with meditation to raise understanding of thought patterns and how to be more present in daily life.

Computerised cognitive behavioural therapy (CCBT)

CCBT uses many of the same methods as CBT but through online self-help exercises instead of in-person.

If you would like more information on a suitable talking therapy for your anxiety, your GP may be able to help.

- ✉ In England, you can also refer yourself to NHS Talking Therapies here: nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service
- ✉ In Scotland the Living Life service can be accessed here: nhs24.scot/our-services/living-life/
- ✉ In Wales, Silver Cloud is accessible here: bcuhb.nhs.wales/health-advice/mental-health-hub/silvercloud-free-online-mental-health-therapy/
- ✉ In Northern Ireland visit: communitywellbeing.info/zcards/ to see what is available in your Trust area.

Support groups

You can learn a lot about managing anxiety by talking to other people who have experienced it. Local support or self-help groups bring people with similar experiences together to share stories, tips, and encouragement for managing anxiety.

Mind and Rethink Mental Illness

both offer online support forums. If you would like details of in-person support groups near you, your doctor, library, or local Citizens Advice Bureau can help.

Medication

If you're struggling with day-to-day life due to feelings of anxiety, your doctor may talk to you about the option of drug treatments, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).¹¹

It's good to keep in mind that medications treat the symptoms of anxiety rather than look at the root causes. So, while drugs often play an important role in the early stages of anxiety management, they may be most useful when combined with other treatments or support.

Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

Our website offers information on mental health, mental health problems, self-help and how to get help.

Visit mentalhealth.org.uk.

Every Mind Matters

Every Mind Matters has information and advice here:

nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/anxiety/

Samaritans

Samaritans offer emotional support 24 hours a day – in full confidence.

Call [116 123](tel:116123), or email jo@samaritans.org.

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

Find a therapist through the online directory.

Email bacp@bacp.co.uk or visit bacp.co.uk

Council for Psychotherapy

UKCP has a freely accessible directory of therapists, and information about therapy.

Find a therapist through the online directory.

Email: info@ukcp.org.uk or visit psychotherapy.org.uk

NHS 111

NHS 111 provides information 24 hours a day. Call [111](tel:111), or visit nhs.uk.

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Together, we can help you cope with anxiety and fear in healthy ways and improve your overall wellbeing.

Everyone gets anxious at times, but no one should have to manage this alone. We should all have access to strategies to help us cope with anxiety and fear. At the Mental Health Foundation, we believe everyone deserves to know how to manage their mental health.

Mental Health Foundation is the UK charity solely focused on preventing poor mental health and building and protecting good mental health. We research, develop and campaign for new and more effective ways to support and protect people's good mental health.

We hope you found this booklet informative and useful.



We rely on public donations and grant funding to continue our vital work. Please consider making a donation mentalhealth.org.uk/donate





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