

A BRIEF GUIDE TO
UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid. It is a natural human response when we feel that we are under threat. Anxiety can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.

Sometimes anxiety can be about physical sensations like:

- churning in the pit of your stomach or feeling sick
- feeling light headed or dizzy because you're breathing too fast

Or psychological sensations like:

- feeling tense, nervous and on edge
- feeling your mind is really busy with thoughts or dwelling on negative experiences

Sometimes these thoughts and feelings can become overwhelming, last for a long time, and affect your everyday life.

What causes anxiety?

It's hard to know why some people experience anxiety as a mental health problem and others don't. There may be no cause, or many contributing factors, like:

- Exhaustion, stress or long working hours
- Pressure at home, at work, or in education

Past or childhood experiences

If something distressing happened to you in the past, you might feel anxious about facing similar situations again.

Diet

Consuming caffeine or eating lots of sugar can mimic and trigger symptoms of anxiety.

Physical and mental health

Managing a long term physical health problem can wear you down and impact your mental wellbeing.

Taking care of yourself

A common – and natural – response to anxiety is to avoid what triggers your fear, so taking any action might make you feel more anxious at first. It can be difficult, but facing up to how anxiety makes you feel can be the first step in breaking the cycle of fear and insecurity.

Talk to someone you trust: Talking to someone you trust about what's making you anxious can help you question your worries and see them in a different way.

Try a breathing exercise: You may find breathing exercises help you to manage anxiety and feel calmer. Keeping your breathing regular and slow will help to reduce your heartbeat.

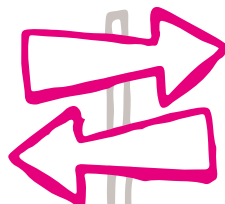
Try shifting your focus: Focus on something that you find interesting, soothing or comforting to distract yourself from the anxiety you are feeling.

Try reassuring yourself: You may find it helpful to tell yourself that the symptoms you experience are actually caused by anxiety – it is not really dangerous, and it will pass.

Physical exercise: Physical exercise generates the hormone adrenaline in a way that feels more normal to us, which can help you manage anxiety.

If you're not able to do physical activities outdoors, or have limited mobility, try to think about what kind of physical activities you can do indoors.

“Getting it off my chest seems to help relieve some of the pressure.”



“For me, actually being diagnosed with anxiety came as a relief! It meant that I wasn’t imagining the awful symptoms I’d been experiencing.”

Community support & treatment

Community support

Many different local community support options exist that can be effective in minimising the symptoms of anxiety:

- Peer support services
- Nature and greenspaces
- Volunteering

You can contact SAMH’s information service for help finding community support local to you.

What treatment can I get for anxiety?

The most common treatments that your GP might offer are talking therapies and certain types of medication. This might vary depending on your diagnosis, but ideally they should offer you a talking therapy before prescribing medication.

Talking therapies

There are many different talking therapies that can be effective in treating anxiety:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – this could be one-to-one, group based, or online
- Interpersonal therapy (IPT)
- Behavioural activation

Medication

There are different types of medication which can be helpful in managing anxiety, but before prescribing these drugs your doctor should explain to you what the medication is for and discuss any possible side effects.



“When I’m anxious, I take myself away from everyone... and sing to myself. Not full on belting out a tune, but just quietly or even humming... it really calms me down.”

How can you help?

It can be really difficult when someone you care about is experiencing anxiety, but there are things you can do to help.

Empathise with them: Try to think about how you feel when you are anxious about something yourself, and how you prefer people to help you.

Try not to pressure them: When someone is experiencing a problem it’s understandable to want to help them face their fear, or focus on practical solutions. But it can be distressing for someone to feel forced to face situations before they’re ready.

Ask them how you can help: The person may already know how you can support them. Asking them what they need, or how you can help, can support them to feel more in control themselves.

Learn about anxiety: You might feel more able to help the person manage their anxiety if you learn more about the condition yourself. SAMH has helpful guides on supporting others - visit our website to learn more.

Encourage them to seek help: If the person’s anxiety is becoming a problem for them, you could encourage them to seek help. This could be support through local community services or their GP.

“Be kind, be non-judgemental... let us know it will pass, let us know you are there.”



Useful contacts

SAMH Information Service

0344 800 0550
info@samh.org.uk
www.samh.org.uk/information-service

Got a question about mental health or wellbeing?
We can help. Contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 6pm.

Breathing Space

0800 83 85 87
www.breathingspace.scot

Confidential out of office hours telephone line for people experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression.

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/SAMHmentalhealth

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