

Understanding anxiety

Throughout our lifetime, most of us will experience stressful periods from time to time. Being worried or anxious during these times is normal and is how we prepare ourselves to deal with the situation at hand.

Anxiety is characterised by unrealistic, excessive and consistent worry. While many people experience anxiety, it becomes a problem when it prevents us from carrying out everyday activities, when it happens frequently, and when it leaves you feeling overwhelmed.

How do I know if I am experiencing anxiety?

People with anxiety may experience a wide range of signs from intense and unrealistic worry and finding it difficult to relax through to physical symptoms. They may also experience extreme stress or panic attacks, have an irrational fear of everyday situations and socially isolate themselves or become withdrawn.

The physical symptoms may include muscle tension, restlessness, twitching and shaking, difficulty concentrating, dizziness, dry mouth, nausea, diarrhoea, frequent urination, flushes, palpitations, chest pain, sweating, faintness, tingling in the hands and feet, insomnia and difficulty getting to sleep.

What are anxiety disorders?

When anxiety is problematic it is classified into different types, referred to as disorders. Some of the more common anxiety disorders include:

- ◆ **Generalised Anxiety Disorder** – spending large amounts of time worrying about everyday things that would not usually bother others. The worries can seem out of control and is often accompanied by feeling nervous and tense most of the time.
- ◆ **Social Anxiety Disorder** – experiencing intense anxiety in social situations and feeling frightened of being judged or doing something that might embarrass them. This frequently leads to an avoidance of social situations or any activity where they might be noticed or given attention.
- ◆ **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** – experiencing intrusive and involuntary thoughts or impulses and feeling compelled to perform behavioural and mental rituals such as excessive hand washing, showering or cleaning.
- ◆ **Panic Disorder** – experiencing frequent panic attacks and worrying about having another panic attack.
- ◆ **Specific Phobias** – having an intense fear of a particular object or situation that leads them to avoid the object or situation. This may be a fear of spiders or snakes, or a fear of confined spaces.

How can I help someone with anxiety?

Someone who is experiencing anxiety problems first and foremost needs understanding. If they have chosen to talk with you about their concern it is a sign that they trust you. It is important to be patient, listen to their concerns and fears, and take them seriously. One of the most helpful things you can do is to encourage them to seek professional help.

In addition to professional support, the following strategies can also assist:

- ◆ **Focus on good physical health** – help them to eat well, have a regular exercise pattern, and build a consistent sleep routine
- ◆ **Avoid stimulants and substances** – help them to stay away from drugs, alcohol and excessive caffeine as ways of coping
- ◆ **Practise relaxation strategies** – encourage them to participate in activities such as meditating, yoga, listening to music, walking outdoors to promote relaxation
- ◆ **Breathing exercises** – help them learn and practise a simple breathing exercise that they can use to quickly bring their breathing and heart rate back to a calmer level
- ◆ **Raise awareness** – help them to increase awareness of what is happening to them by identifying any specific triggers, monitoring when emotion occurs and under what circumstances
- ◆ **Set goals** – work with them to set specific and realistic goals and develop steps to achieve the goals. In the initial stages the goals may need to be broken into small steps and recognise their progress as they succeed

A simple slow breathing exercise

1. Stop what you are doing and hold your breath for 8 seconds
2. Breathe out and say the word 'relax' to yourself
3. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth (5 seconds in and 7 seconds out) and say 'relax' to yourself on the outward breath
4. At the end of each outward breath hold your breath for 8 seconds
5. Continue this pattern for 1-2 minutes
6. Practise the breathing technique daily