

How to...

Overcome fear and anxiety



Mental Health
Foundation

Fear and anxiety

Fear is one of the most powerful emotions. It has a very strong effect on your mind and body.

Fear can create strong signals of response when we're in emergencies – for instance, if we are caught in a fire or are being attacked.

It can also take effect when you're faced with non-dangerous events, like exams, public speaking, a new job, a date, or even a party. It's a natural response to a threat that can be either perceived or real.

Anxiety is a word we use for some types of fear that are usually to do with the thought of a threat or something going wrong in the future, rather than right now.

Fear and anxiety can last for a short time and then pass, but they can also last much longer and you can get stuck with them. In some cases they can take over your life, affecting your ability to eat, sleep, concentrate, travel, enjoy life, or even leave the house or go to work or school. This can hold you back from doing things you want or need to do, and it also affects your health.

Some people become overwhelmed by fear and want to avoid situations that might make them frightened or anxious. It can be hard to break this cycle, but there are lots of ways to do it. You can learn to feel less fearful and to cope with fear so that it doesn't stop you from living.

What makes you afraid?

Lots of things make us feel afraid. Being afraid of some things – like fires – can keep you safe. Fearing failure can make you try to do well so that you won't fail, but it can also stop you doing well if the feeling is too strong.

What you're afraid of and how you act when you're afraid of something can vary per person. Just knowing what makes you afraid and why can be the first step to sorting out problems with fear.

Manage and reduce stress:

How can we manage and reduce stress? Our free downloadable pocket guide offers you 101 tips: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-stress.

What makes you anxious?

Because anxiety is a type of fear, the things we've described about fear above are also true for anxiety.

The word 'anxiety' tends to be used to describe worry, or when fear is nagging and persists over time. It is used when the fear is about something in the future rather than what is happening right now.

Anxiety is a word often used by health professionals when they're describing persistent fear. The ways that you feel when you're frightened and anxious are very similar, as the basic emotion is the same.

What do fear and anxiety 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 very fast – maybe it feels irregular
- You breathe very fast
- Your muscles feel weak
- You sweat a lot
- Your stomach churns or your bowels feel loose
- You find it hard to concentrate on anything else
- You feel dizzy
- You feel frozen to the spot
- You can't eat
- You have hot and cold sweats
- You get a dry mouth
- You get very tense muscles

These things occur because your body, sensing fear, is preparing you for an emergency, so it makes your blood flow to the muscles, increases blood sugar, and gives you the mental ability to focus on the thing that your body perceives as a threat.

With anxiety, in the longer term, you may have some of the above symptoms as well as a more nagging sense of fear, and you may get irritable, have trouble sleeping, develop headaches, or have trouble getting on with work and planning for the future; you might have problems having sex, and might lose self-confidence.

Why do I feel like this when I'm not in any real danger?

Early humans needed the fast, powerful responses that fear causes, as they were often in situations of physical danger; however, we no longer face the same threats in modern-day living.

Despite this, our minds and bodies still work in the same way as our early ancestors, and we have the same reactions to our modern worries about bills, travel 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 are experiencing them and you don't know why, 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, which could be imaginary or minor.

Why won't my fear go away and leave me feeling normal again?

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 can't put your finger on why. Some people feel a constant sense of anxiety all the time, without any particular trigger.

There are plenty of triggers for fear in everyday life, and you can't always work out exactly why you are frightened or how likely you are to be harmed. Even if you can see how out of proportion a fear is, the emotional part of your brain keeps sending danger signals to your body.

Sometimes you need mental and physical ways of tackling fear.

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is when you feel overwhelmed by the physical and mental feelings of fear – the signs listed under ‘What do fear and anxiety feel like?’ People who have panic attacks say that they find it hard to breathe, and they may worry that they’re having a heart attack or are going to lose control of their body. See the ‘Support and information’ section at the end of this booklet if you want help with panic attacks.

What is a phobia?

A phobia is an extreme fear of a particular animal, thing, place or situation. People with phobias have an overwhelming need to avoid any contact with the specific cause of the anxiety or fear. The thought of coming into contact with the cause of the phobia makes you anxious or panicky.

How do I know if I need help?

Fear and anxiety can affect all of us every now and then. It is only when it is severe and long-lasting that doctors class it as a mental health problem. If you feel anxious all the time for several weeks, or if it feels like your fears are taking over your life, then it’s a good idea to ask your doctor for help, or try one of the websites or numbers listed at the back of this booklet. The same is true if a phobia is causing problems in your daily life, or if you are experiencing panic attacks.

How can I help myself?

Face your fear if you can

If you always avoid situations that scare you, you might stop doing things you want or need to do. You won't be able to test out whether the situation is always as bad as you expect, so you miss the chance to work out how to manage your fears and reduce your anxiety. Anxiety problems tend to increase if you get into this pattern. Exposing yourself to your fears can be an effective way of overcoming this anxiety.

Know yourself

Try to learn more about your fear or anxiety. Keep an anxiety diary or thought record to note down when it happens and what happens. You can try setting yourself small, achievable goals for facing your fears. You could carry with you a list of things that help at times when you are likely to become frightened or anxious. This can be an effective way of addressing the underlying beliefs that are behind your anxiety.

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Exercise

Increase the amount of exercise you do. Exercise requires some concentration, and this can take your mind off your fear and anxiety.

Relax

Learning relaxation techniques can help you with the mental and physical feelings of fear. It can help just to drop your shoulders and breathe deeply. Or imagine yourself in a relaxing place. You could also try learning things like yoga, meditation, massage, or listen to the Mental Health Foundation's wellbeing podcasts at: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help/podcasts.

Healthy eating

Eat lots of fruit and vegetables, and try to avoid too much sugar. Resulting dips in your blood sugar can give you anxious feelings. Try to avoid drinking too much tea and coffee, as caffeine can increase anxiety levels.

Avoid alcohol, or drink in moderation

It's very common for people to drink when they feel nervous. Some people call alcohol 'Dutch courage', but the after-effects of alcohol can make you feel even more afraid or anxious.

Complementary therapies

Some people find that complementary therapies or exercises, such as relaxation techniques, meditation, yoga, or t'ai chi, help them to deal with their anxiety.

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 church and other faith groups can connect you with a valuable support network.

How do I get help?

Talking therapies

Talking therapies, like counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, are very effective for people with anxiety problems, including Computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which takes you through a series of self-help exercises on screen. Visit your GP to find out more.

Medication

Drug treatments are used to provide short-term help, rather than looking at the root of the anxiety problems. Drugs may be most useful when they are combined with other treatments or support.

Support groups

You can learn a lot about managing anxiety from asking other people who have experienced it. Local support groups or self-help groups bring together people with similar experiences so that they can hear each other's stories, share tips and encourage each other to try out new ways to manage themselves. Your doctor, library or local Citizens Advice bureau will have details of support groups near you.

Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

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

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Anxiety UK

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Telephone: 08444 775 774

Confidential help and support

The Samaritans provides emotional support 24 hours a day.

www.samaritans.org

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Counselling

The British Association of Counselling and
Psychotherapy

www.bacp.co.uk

Email: bacp@bacp.co.uk

Telephone: 01455 883300

UK Council for Psychotherapy

www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Email: info@ukcp.org.uk

Telephone: 020 7014 9955

General health information

NHS 111 provides information 24 hours a day.

www.nhs.uk

Telephone: 111

The Mental Health Foundation

Changing minds, changing lives

Our vision is for a world with good mental health for all.

Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place. We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at the national and local government level. In tandem we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage.

This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.

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