



Understanding and Managing Anxiety

A Self Help Guide for
Students and Parents

Anxiety – What Is It?



Anxiety is the body's way of responding to being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight. This happens whether the danger is real, or whether we believe the danger is there when actually there is none. It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism. Primitive man wouldn't have survived for long without this life-saving response. It works so well, that it often kicks in when it's not needed - when the danger is in our heads rather than in reality. We think we're in danger, so that's enough to trigger the system to go, go, go!

Anxiety can be the result of intense worry, extreme stress, a reaction to difficult experiences or feelings of uncertainty or a loss of control in your life. It is an overwhelming experience affecting your whole body and in some cases can result in panic attacks.

Anxiety Thoughts:

"I'm in danger right now"

"The worst possible scenario is going to happen"

"I won't be able to cope with it"

People who get anxious tend to get into scanning mode - where they're constantly on the lookout for danger, hyper-alert to any of the signals, and make it more likely that the alarm system will be activated.

Physical Sensations - The Adrenaline Response

When there is real, or we believe there is a real, threat or danger, our bodies' automatic survival mechanism kicks in very quickly. This helps energise us to fight or run away ('fight or flight response'). The action urge associated with anxiety is to escape or avoid. We will therefore notice lots of physical sensations.

- Heart rate increases
- Breathing speeds up, breathless, choking feeling
- Muscles tense, aching, shaking
- Hot, Sweating
- Lightheaded, Blurred vision
- Butterflies in tummy, urge to go to the toilet
- More alert – scanning for danger

Anxiety Behaviours

Anxiety can make us behave in certain ways which makes us feel safer:

- Avoiding people or places
- Not going out
- Only going with someone else
- Escape, leave early
- Avoid eye contact
- Stop speaking in public or to people you don't know very well



Safety Behaviours – They don't help

Safety behaviours can also help to keep your anxiety going. Whilst you depend on them to help you cope, you don't get to find out that without them, the anxiety would reduce and go away on its own.

Whilst avoiding people or situations might help you feel better at that time, it doesn't make your anxiety any better over a longer period. If you're frightened that your anxiety will make you pass out or vomit in the supermarket aisle, you won't find out that won't actually happen, because you don't go. So the belief that it will happen remains, along with the anxiety.

Vicious Cycle of Anxiety



We all feel anxious some times. A certain amount of anxiety helps us to be more alert and focused. For example just prior to an exam, a few exam nerves have a positive effect - motivating us, helping us focus our thoughts on the job in hand, and making us more alert. Too much anxiety, or constantly being anxious, is unhealthy and detrimental to our lives and wellbeing.



How to Manage Anxiety

Sometimes anxiety will pass when a feared situation ends. If this is continuing experience then there are things you can do to help you manage your anxiety.

Explore what has caused you the anxiety and talk about it with someone you can trust. If you find talking difficult you can always write down your feelings and share them that way. Sometimes just the process of writing down our thoughts can help us to feel much better

Reflect on past enjoyable experiences you have had. This can help shift the focus from what you might be worrying about.

Don't spend too much time on social media and worrying about what other people think or what other people are doing. Remind yourself that what most people share on social media is a skewed and selective version of their actual life experiences

3 Steps for Taking Back Control

1. Slow down your breathing. It is impossible to stay in a high state of alert if your breathing is slow and calm. Try breathing **IN** for a count of **5** and **OUT** for a count of **7**. Do this for a number of times.
2. Think of a place where you feel really calm and relaxed. Imagine being there right now. What can you see and hear. Use all of your senses to notice smells and tastes around you. Feel how your breathing naturally slows down when you take your brain to a place free from worries and anxieties
3. Distraction is key. Try doing some exercise, kicking a ball, running up and down the stairs, bouncing a ball. Sometimes it is useful to thank the brain for warning you that there could possibly be some danger around, but remind it that YOU are the one in charge so go and find something fun to do.

Practice Makes Perfect

Worksheets: - How To Cope With Anxiety

In Library:

The Rough Guide to Happiness by Nick Baylis

Mind Your Head by Juno Dawson

