

Factsheet: **Anxiety**

Anxiety describes feelings of unease, worry and fear. It incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations you might experience when you are worried or nervous about something. Anxiety is related to the ‘fight or flight’ response – our normal biological reaction to feeling threatened.

We all know what it's like to feel anxious from time to time. It's a normal human response to feel tense, nervous and perhaps fearful at the thought of a stressful event or decision you're facing – especially if it could have a big impact on your life. For example a build-up of stress at work, starting a new job, moving house or getting married or divorced.

In situations like these it's understandable to have worries about how you will perform, or what the outcome will be. For a short time you might even find it hard to sleep, eat or concentrate. Then usually, after a short while or when the situation has passed, the feelings of worry stop. It's sometimes hard to know when it's becoming a problem for you – but if your feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, it can be overwhelming. You might find that you're worrying all the time, perhaps about things that are a regular part of everyday life, or about things that aren't likely to happen. You may regularly experience unpleasant physical and psychological effects of anxiety, and maybe panic attacks.

Symptoms of Anxiety

- ▶ Panic, fear, and uneasiness
- ▶ Sleep problems
- ▶ Not being able to stay calm and still
- ▶ Cold, sweaty, numb or tingling hands or feet
- ▶ Shortness of breath
- ▶ Heart palpitations
- ▶ Dry mouth
- ▶ Nausea
- ▶ Tense muscles
- ▶ Dizziness
- ▶ Overeating

The ‘fight’ or ‘flight’ response

Like all other animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from dangerous, life-threatening situations. When you feel under threat your body releases hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, which help physically prepare you to, either fight the danger, or run away from it. These hormones can:

- ▶ **make you feel more alert, so you can act faster**
- ▶ **make your heart beat faster to carry blood quickly to where it's needed most**

Then when you feel the danger has passed, your body releases other hormones to help your muscles relax, which may cause you to shake.

This is commonly called the ‘**fight or flight**’ response – it's something that happens automatically in our bodies, and we have no control over it. In modern society we don't usually face situations where we need to physically fight or flee from danger, but our biological response to feeling threatened is still the same.

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Anxiety disorders

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

If you have felt anxious for a long time and often feel fearful, but are not anxious about anything specific that is happening in your life, you might be diagnosed by your GP with generalised anxiety disorder (GAD).

Panic disorder

If you experience panic attacks that seem completely unpredictable and you can't identify what triggers them, you might be given a diagnosis of **panic disorder**. Experiencing panic disorder can mean that you feel constantly afraid of having another panic attack, to the point that this fear itself can trigger your panic attacks. A panic attack can be very unpleasant and the symptoms will mimic several physical illnesses – so you will always need to be assessed medically to ensure you get the right treatment

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a diagnosis you might be given if your anxiety leads you to experience:

obsessions – unwelcome thoughts, images, urges or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind

compulsions – repetitive activities that you feel you have to do and cannot control

Phobias

A phobia is an intense fear of something, even when that thing is very unlikely to be dangerous to you. If you have a phobia, your anxiety may be triggered by very specific situations or objects.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

If you develop strong feelings of anxiety after experiencing or witnessing something you found very traumatic, you might be given a diagnosis of PTSD. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares which can feel like you're re-living all the fear and anxiety you experienced during the actual event.

How can I cope?

If you experience anxiety or panic attacks there are many things you can do to cope:

talking to someone you trust

breathing exercises

shifting your focus

listening to music

reassuring thoughts

physical exercise

keeping a diary

eating a healthy diet

complementary therapies

joining a support group

Treatment for anxiety

If you are worried about your anxious feelings or if they are persistent it is important to see your GP. Many people find **counselling** and **CBT** (cognitive behaviour therapy) helps with anxiety. **Mindfulness** can also help calm the mind.- check out the **Headspace** website www.headspace.com or app for more information.