Anxiety Support

What is anxiety?

Everyone feels anxious at times. Anxiety is a normal response designed to keep us aware of our surroundings when there is potential danger, so that we can be ready to take action. Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried about something bad happening, either now or in the future.

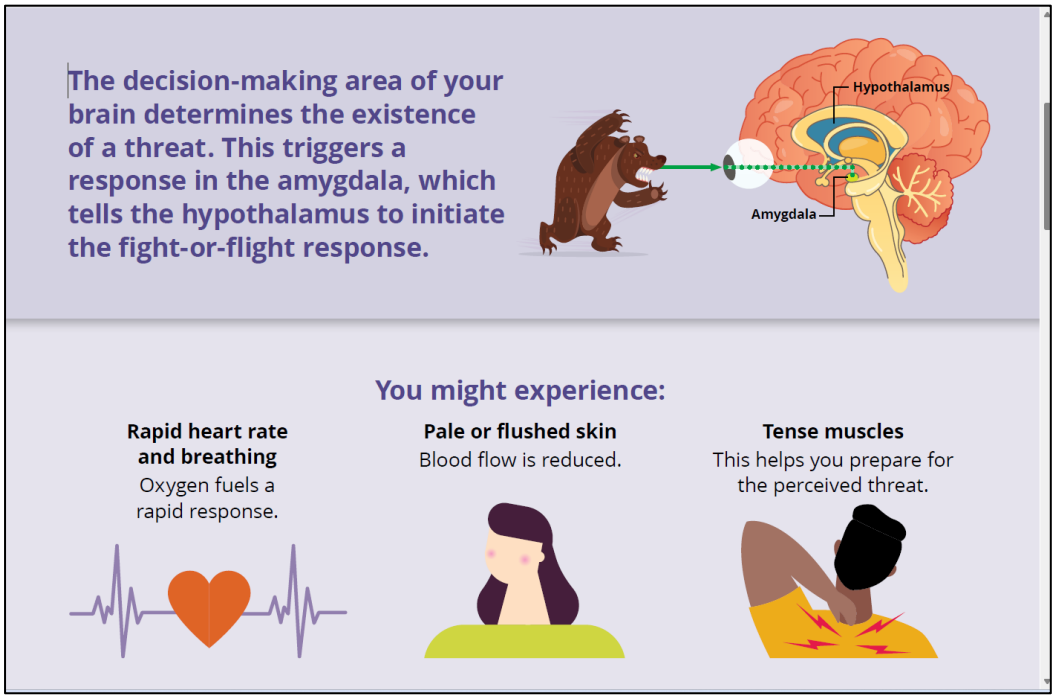
Sometimes we stop being able to manage stress, and instead of anxiety being easy to shake off, we continue to feel anxious increasingly often and are unable to cope with the building fear. The effects on us are physical and psychological. If anxiety is overwhelming and affecting daily life, we can be diagnosed with anxiety disorder.

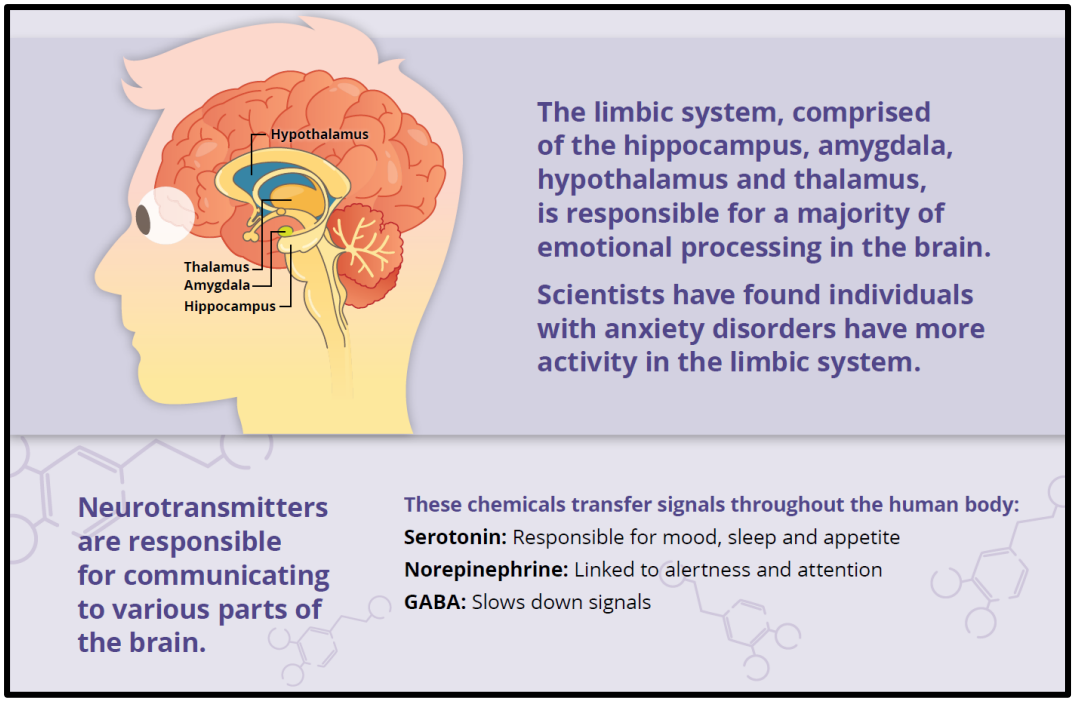
Anxiety is the most common mental health disorder in modern society. The three main types of anxiety disorder are Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder and phobia – related disorders.

Symptoms: Effect on the body and the mind

Sometimes understanding the Science behind our anxiety can help us to make sense of the physical feelings we experience. When we are frightened of something, our body produces the 'flight, fight, or freeze' response. This is initiated by hormones in the body like cortisol and adrenaline. This response is the body's way of responding to danger and is short-lived.

Anxiety disorders are thought to arise from the limbic centre of the brain. This area is responsible for our emotions, and in anxiety disorders, the limbic system is overactive. The 'flight, fight or freeze' response becomes initiated too often, or for too long, leading to a range of distressing symptoms. The following infographic is useful:





https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/emotional-health/the-science-of-anxiety

Types of anxiety/disorders

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD):

Symptoms include

- excessive worry and stress,
- difficulty sleeping,
- getting tired easily,
- feeling tense,
- stomach problems,
- palpitations,
- lightheadedness,
- dizziness,
- sweating,
- trouble swallowing,
- difficulty concentrating,
- muscle aches,
- muscle tension,
- more frequent trips to the bathroom,
- irritability,
- restlessness.

People worry about lots of things – for instance: their own health, the health of others, finances, the wellbeing of family/friends, being late, their job, their responsibilities. GAD seems to run in families, but is thought to be caused by genetics, brain chemistry and the environment. Experiencing a particularly

traumatic event can make a person more likely to develop GAD. GAD can co-occur with other illnesses such as depression, panic disorder, substance abuse, PTSD, or chronic fatigue.

Social Anxiety Disorder:

Social Anxiety Disorder is not the same as being shy. With Social Anxiety Disorder, people worry about social situations before, during and after a social event. Sufferers of Social Anxiety Disorder operate in constant fear of being criticised, judged, ridiculed, or rejected. It therefore affects work, relationships, and home life. Symptoms may include:

- Worrying you may blush, say something silly, or sweat excessively
- Worry about meeting new people, including in a shop, or at work
- Worry about speaking on the phone
- Fear that you will be criticised, watched or judged
- Worry about talking/eating in group situations
- You may also have some of the physical symptoms like palpitations, feeling nauseous, sweating, avoiding eye contact, speaking very softly, or shaking.

Panic Disorder:

Panic disorder is diagnosed when someone has repeated and unexpected panic attacks with overwhelming panic and fear. They occur suddenly, and therefore people can be filled with a sense of doom, and that they may be having a heart attack, or dying. Panic attacks make a person feel nervous about when the next one will happen, and it therefore can cause people to avoid a situation where they may have had a panic attack previously. This can significantly restrict a person's life. Panic attacks are more severe and acute than anxiety, but they can co-occur.

Physical symptoms during a panic attack may include:

- Pounding or racing heart
- Sweating
- Chills
- Trembling
- Difficulty breathing
- Weakness or dizziness
- Tingly or numb hands
- Chest pain
- Stomach pain or nausea

Phobia – related disorders:

A phobia is an extreme and crippling fear, where the fear doesn't match the risk of danger. Examples include fear of:

- Flying
- Snakes
- Enclosed spaces
- Spiders
- Injections
- Blood
- Open spaces
- Public transport
- crowds

Some phobias can result in people avoiding leaving the house at all.

Risk factors to developing a phobia includes exposure to an object or event which becomes the focus of the phobia, a history of anxiety in biological relatives, and feeling distressed around new situations in childhood.

Self care/treatment

Dealing with anxiety is hard. The first step is to try to talk through, or write down, the things that are worrying you. It may feel a little silly at first, and you may find it hard to admit to some of the triggers you have. Try to think of places or situations where you are most likely to experience your anxiety symptoms. Do you avoid these places? Does this help, or does it restrict your life? Are the worries about things you can control?

There are two areas of focus for dealing with anxiety – one is to practice short-term ways to manage symptoms, and the other is to have therapeutic counselling style support. The following tips will help with the former.

Keeping a diary can be useful to help you identify triggers. However, be aware that if you are experiencing panic attacks, this can make you feel even more perplexed as patterns in symptoms can be impossible to spot. Keeping a diary should also include writing down the positive things in your day. If you have had a day where anxiety is low, it is important to record this too. Be nice to yourself when you have managed successfully to do something which you normally struggle with. Likewise, don't beat yourself up when you have an anxiety-riddled day. It happens.

People with anxiety disorders are thought to have generally high levels of stress hormones. There are things you can do to reduce these levels, such as:

- Yoga
- Exercise
- Meditation
- Breathing exercises

- Massage
- Spending time outdoors in nature
- Spending time with pets
- Eating well
- Avoiding alcohol

These are not 'magic bullets' for the times we are at our most extreme with our symptoms, but building these things into our daily/weekly routines makes a big difference long-term.

Try to accept that in life nothing is certain. We cannot be sure that something bad won't happen, or that we won't become ill, or that an accident may happen. However, if we convince ourselves that we are certain of bad things happening, we spend more and more time worrying about it. Some people find it useful to set aside a specific time in the day for worries to be 'allowed'. Setting boundaries like this can allow you to get on with the rest of the day without becoming so overwhelmed.

When difficult thoughts come into our heads it can be difficult not to try to make it go away. Accepting the thought has popped up, and allowing it to pass is a way of being kind to yourself. This can keep stress hormones lower, and allow anxious moments to pass more quickly. It takes time to learn this strategy, but it is invaluable. 'Notice' the symptoms appearing, and observe them with interest. It sounds weird, but it works.

If you can couple this acceptance with some controlled breathing, even better! There are lots of YouTube videos with breathing exercises. Try a few out to find one that suits you best, and practice them when you are calm. Once you have mastered the breathing during calm moments, you will feel increasingly able to do this when you feel anxiety rising.

Using the senses to support anxiety is really useful. It may be good to prepare a sensory box containing your favourite smells, textures, tastes, a heavy blanket, or a reminder of a piece of music that relaxes you. When we are anxious, we can find it really hard to think of something to help us, so if there is just one place to look, we are more likely to be able to self-help. We can also write notes to put in the box to remind us to go for a walk, or crunch some ice cubes. Find what works for you.

<u>Treatment</u>

It is important to remember that self-help is not the only option open to you. Seek support from your GP. They will probably start by offering you a self-help course. This may include workbooks, or CBT. There are online CBT courses to treat anxiety disorders – some you work through on your own, but some have a practitioner to support you through the course. A group psychoeducation course may also be offered.

If the self-help style courses do not give you sufficient support, don't be afraid to go back to the GP. The GP can refer you to talking therapies, where CBT or relaxation techniques are used. The GP may also prescribe antidepressants, pregabalin (for GAD), beta blockers (for physical symptoms of panic), or benzodiazepine (for very severe anxiety). The self-help courses or talking therapies should be offered alongside the medication.

In talking therapies the counsellor will aim to allow you to discuss difficulties during childhood, or any traumatic events which may have happened to you. If we experience stressful events in our past, particularly if we felt 'alone' with those experiences, our nervous system can be epigenetically altered. This means our genes which control our nervous system can be set to high alert, causing a flight/fight response at times where it is unnecessary for our safely. This can be 'reset' during therapy.

How friends/family can help

If friends and family can help to remind you of all the self-help strategies, that is invaluable. When we are anxious, our problem-solving brain is temporarily blocked off, so we can find it difficult to think of all the things that help the anxiety to pass. It can be helpful for a trusted person to suggest a walk, or put the sensory box in front of you. When you are feeling calm, help your trusted people to know the right thing to do when you are at your most distressed.

Friends and family can also help you to make contact with some of the help groups or charities. There is a lot of peer support out there which can stop you feeling so alone with your illness. (see helplines/contacts).

Helplines/ useful contacts:

Anxiety Care UK

anxietycare.org.uk
Helps people with anxiety disorders.

Anxiety UK

03444 775 774 (helpline)
07537 416 905 (text)
anxietyuk.org.uk
Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

bacp.co.uk
Professional body for talking therapy and counselling. Provides information and a list of accredited therapists.

Hub of Hope

hubofhope.co.uk
UK-wide mental health service database. Lets you search for local, national, peer, community, charity, private and NHS mental health support. You can filter results to find specific kinds of support.

MIND

- Mind's helplines provide information and support by phone and email.
- Local Minds offer face-to-face services across England and Wales. These services include talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- Side by Side is our supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

NHS Services Finder

nhs.uk/service-search (England)
111.wales.nhs.uk/localservices (Wales)
Searchable database of NHS services.

NHS talking therapies self-referral

nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service
Information about local NHS therapy services for certain mental health problems. You can self-refer (England only) but you must be registered with a GP.

No More Panic

nomorepanic.co.uk
Provides information, support and advice for those with panic disorder, anxiety, phobias or OCD, including a forum and chat room.

No Panic

0300 7729844
nopanic.org.uk
Provides a helpline, step-by-step programmes, and support for people with anxiety disorders.

Samaritans

116 123 (freephone)
jo@samaritans.org (email response may take several days)
Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS
samaritans.org

Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone who needs to talk. You can visit some Samaritans branches in person. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm–11pm every day).

Triumph Over Phobia (TOP UK)

topuk.org
Self-help therapy groups and support for those with OCD, phobias and related anxiety disorders.

Bibliography

MIND Anxiety and panic attacks | Mind

Anxiety and panic attacks - NHS

Anxiety vs Panic Attacks: Key Differences and Similarities Explained

Panic Disorder: What You Need to Know - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Anxiety Disorders - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

The Science of Anxiety (Infographic) | Northwestern Medicine

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of advice from your GP.

Nikki Fouracre, Aug 2026