

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 tells you what to do in emergencies, like a fire or being attacked.

It can also kick in when you're faced with non-dangerous stuff, like exams, public speaking, a new job, a date, or even a party. It's a natural response to a threat.

Anxiety is a word we use for some types of fear, 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 and 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 affect your health.

Health problems that are directly based on fear include phobias, panic attacks and anxiety disorders.

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 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 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 depends on lots of things, like your genes, how you were brought up, what's happened to you in your life, and the way you learn and cope with things. Just knowing what makes you afraid and why can be the first steps to sorting out problems with fear.

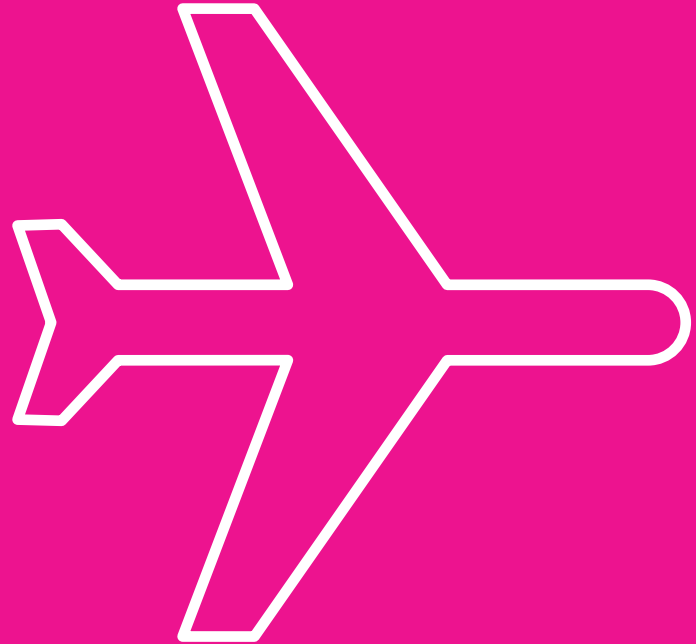
What makes you anxious?

Because anxiety is a type of fear, the things we've said about fear are 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 workers 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.

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Fear and anxiety make our minds and bodies work very quickly.



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 is churning 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 are all 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 mental ability to focus only on the thing that's scaring you.

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

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

Early humans needed the fast, powerful reactions that fear causes as they were often in physical danger from big problems like snakes and lions – before modern living took over.

But our minds and bodies still work in the same way and we still have the same reactions to more modern worries like bills, travel and social situations. But we can't run away or physically attack these problems!

The physical feelings of fear can be scary in themselves – especially if you have them and you don't know why or they seem out of proportion. Instead of alerting you to a danger and preparing you to respond to it, your fear or anxiety can kick in with non-existent or minor threats.

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 unusual.

But it can be an everyday, long-lasting problem – even if you can't put your finger on why. Some people feel a constant 'free-floating' sense of anxiety all the time, without any particular trigger.

But 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 ones listed under ‘What do fear and anxiety feel like?’ People who have panic attacks say 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 bodies. 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 have 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.

Know yourself

Try to learn more about your fear or anxiety. Keep a record of when it happens and what happens. You can try setting yourself small, achievable goals to face your fears. You could carry with you a list of things that help at times when you are likely to be become frightened or anxious.

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Increase the amount of exercise you do. This can trigger brain chemicals that improve your mood. Exercise needs concentration, and this can take your mind off 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 learn things like yoga, meditation, massage, or try the Mental Health Foundations'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 complementary therapies help, like massage or herbal products.

Faith/spirituality

If you are religious or spiritual, this can give you a way of feeling connected to something bigger than yourself. It can provide a way of coping with everyday stress and church and other faith groups can be 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 as a cure for 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 they can hear each other's stories, share tips and encourage each other to try out new ways of managing their worries. Your doctor, library or local citizens advice bureau will have details of support groups near you.

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Support and information

Mental Health Foundation

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

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Anxiety UK

Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk
Telephone: 08444 775 774

Anxiety Care

Website: www.anxietycare.org.uk
Telephone: 020 8478 3400

Confidential help and support

Samaritans provides emotional support 24 hours a day.

Website: www.samaritans.org
Email: jo@samaritans.org
Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Counselling

The British Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy.

Website: www.bacp.co.uk
Email: bcap@bacp.co.uk
Telephone: 01455 883300

UK Council for Psychotherapy

Website: www.psychotherapy.org.uk
Telephone: 020 7014 9955

General health information

NHS Direct provides information 24 hours a day.

Website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.org
Telephone: 0845 4647

We hope you found this booklet useful and informative.

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To find out how you can donate or become involved with the work of the Foundation contact us.

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/support-us/get-involved/

Telephone: 020 7803 1121

Email: supporter@mhf.org.uk

Mental Health Foundation

Telephone
020 7803 1100

Email
info@mentalhealth.org.uk
Website
mentalhealth.org.uk

Registered Charity No.
England 801130
Scotland SC039714

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