



Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety problems are very common with one person in ten consulting a doctor about feeling tense, worried or anxious.

Anxiety affects both the body and the mind and refers to emotions and states of the mind such as fear, apprehension, being “on edge”, “panicky”, or “uptight”. It also refers to bodily sensations such as muscle tension, sweating, trembling, breathing fast, feeling sick, “butterflies in the stomach”, having diarrhoea or racing heart beat.

Sometimes the person may not describe themselves as “anxious” but still have some of the feelings and symptoms given above. The following will still be useful.

When is Anxiety a Problem?

Anxiety is a normal healthy reaction: it happens in times of danger or in worrying situations, speeding up the body’s systems so that it is able to react quickly and respond in an emergency if necessary. It can, in moderate amounts, increase performance on the football field, on stage or in an exam.

Do you remember a time when you experienced high anxiety because of something real; perhaps a dog running out in front of your car?

Did you notice how your anxiety rose and then fell when the dog ran off?

APPROPRIATE anxiety shouldn't cause you to have a panic attack.

This 'automatic anxiety reduction' is part of the body's natural anxiety response and should happen when a fear has subsided, but in high anxiety conditions, like panic attacks, OCD and agoraphobia, the anxiety becomes 'stuck on' and doesn't return to a low level.

Anxiety is stress that continues after the stressor has gone. It becomes a problem when occurs when there is no real danger or it goes on long after the stress is over. If the bodily symptoms occur at a time when it is not necessary to take action, it can become very uncomfortable and lead to the individual to think that there is something physically wrong with them, thus increasing their anxiety. If this occurs repeatedly with no obvious cause then it will begin to interfere with everyday life.

Why do Symptoms Begin?

There is usually a combination of causes, the most important ones are

1. **The Amount of Stress:** anxiety may have begun when you were in very stressful circumstances, be it a single major problem or several concurrent smaller issues. In either case they are sufficient to cause anxiety.

2. **The Kind of Person You Are:** some people seem to be naturally more resilient and better able to cope than others and some can tolerate less stress so are more likely to react with anxiety.

What Keeps Anxiety Going?

It's the way anxiety begins to make you think that keeps it going and it concerns thoughts about anxiety provoking situations, thoughts about the anxiety itself and the loss of self confidence.

1. **Thoughts about Situations:** In times of anxiety people think in a different way to when they are calm and relaxed. Normal situations such as shopping, the school run, socializing seems more risky, threatening and dangerous than they really are. Further, the individual believes that they cannot cope with situations they perceive as difficult, tending to think
 - It is very likely that things will go wrong
 - When things go wrong, they will go disastrously wrong
 - They won't be able to help themselves
 - Nobody will be able to help them

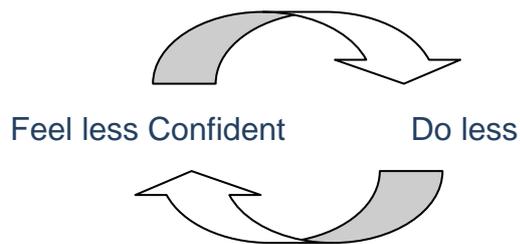
These then become a vicious circle, the more anxious you become, the more negative the thoughts become and more anxious you will feel.

2. **Thoughts about Anxiety:** The physical symptoms of anxiety can be very frightening so that they think that they are ill, losing control or going mad and that they will make a fool of themselves. This in turn creates more anxiety and thus increases the bodily symptoms. On top of this many people worry in advance about putting themselves in certain situations and the worry about being anxious brings on the anxiety. So again you are caught in a vicious circle.

3.



4. **Loss of Confidence:** Confidence is the belief that an individual has that he can succeed in what he does. It comes from past experience of success but anxiety reduces confidence because it makes a person think that they will not be able to do things that were once easy. They then lose more confidence when they find that they cannot do things they thought they could, further inhibiting them from trying anything because they feel too demoralised and unconfident. The vicious circle here then is the less you do the less confident you feel and the less confident you feel the less you feel like doing.



Consequences of Persistent Anxiety

It is normal to avoid dangerous situations, but when anxiety is a problem you may want to avoid things that are not real dangers. The sorts of things that are commonly avoided are crowded places, shops or meeting people; all of which are a necessary part of everyday life, so avoiding them creates great difficulty and inconvenience.

Some kinds of avoidance are less obvious than others, like putting off something that you know you should do. Others are trying not to think about the problems.

Whilst avoiding something may be a relief, it doesn't provide a solution because

- **The relief is only temporary:** you have to continue to worry about how you can avoid it
- **It will make it harder next time:** each time something is avoided
- **More and more things will be avoided:** as less is attempted

How can Anxiety be Managed?

If anxiety has started to have a major impact on your life then you need to seek help to prevent it from becoming crippling. Many people find that they have their own ways to control anxiety and they should be encouraged to identify these and use them. They may include trying to relax, to breathe slowly. Some try to distract their minds while others find it helpful to have someone with them.

Four methods found to be most helpful are

- **Relaxation techniques:** to slow down body systems that speed up in anxiety; because muscular tension causes uncomfortable bodily sensations such as headache; pain due tension increases mental worry and all of these contribute to an overall feeling of tiredness.
- **Learn how to take your mind off the problem:** when you are worried it is hard not to think about the problem but these thoughts contribute to feeling bad and the vicious circle keeps going. If you can ignore the symptoms they will die away of their own accord, but this is very difficult to do. The advice is to firstly make a conscious decision to decide not to think about the feelings and secondly, to fill the mind with something else, suggestions include focusing on what is going on around in the immediate environment, undertaking a mental task such as reciting a poem or mental arithmetic or by doing something physical like going for a walk or washing the car.
- **Learn how to control upsetting thoughts:** by first getting to know the thoughts that you experience when anxiety is felt and then to challenge their validity so that more realistic and helpful thoughts can be instilled in their place.

- **Learn how to manage feelings of panic or of being out of control:** so that if the early signs of anxiety are missed and you rapidly progress to a panic state, then you are able to regain control.

This is a very brief overview of anxiety and some of the ways that it can be overcome. If you feel overwhelmed by your feelings and recognise some of the signs and symptoms given above then consider seeking help through SALS or your GP.

Alternatively there are a number of self-help books available

- **Mind Over Mood by Padeski and Greenburger,**
- **Overcoming Anxiety by Helen Kinnerly.**

And online resources

- www.getselfhelp.co.uk
- www.cci.health.wa.gov.au. **Centre for Clinical Interventions**

This information has been abstracted from *Managing Anxiety* by Gillian Butler and *Controlling Anxiety* by Melanie Fennell and Gillian Butler, both are Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre publications.