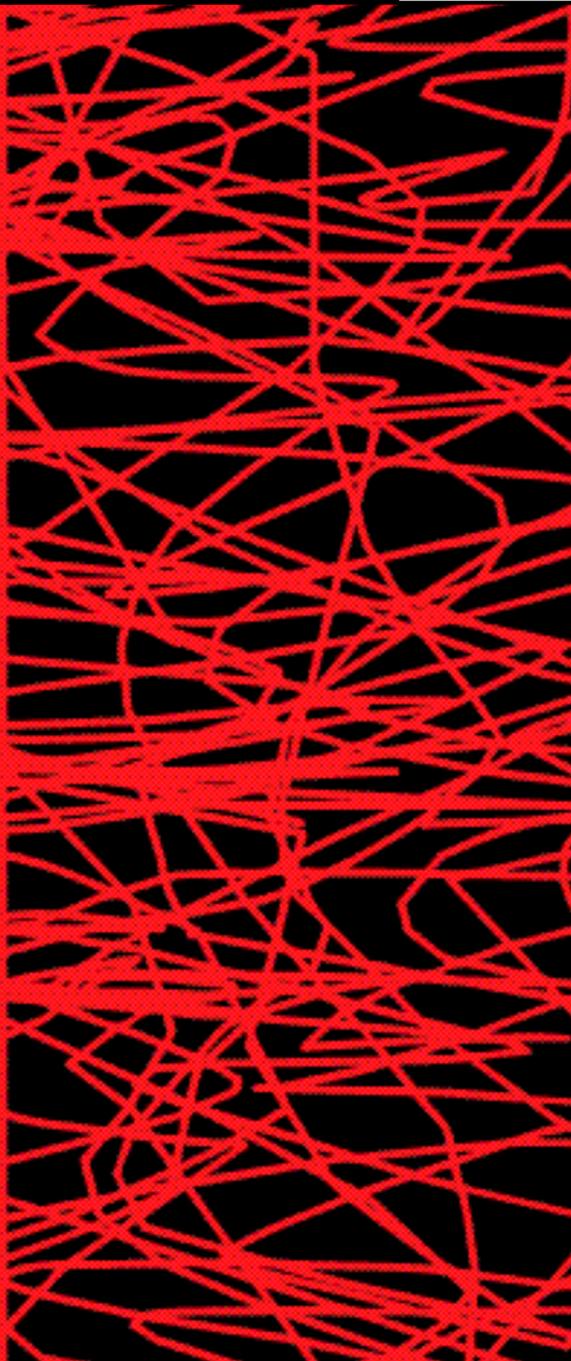


Understanding

▶ anxiety

Mind
Publications



'A job interview usually makes me feel so on edge that I do not sleep the night before. But probably if I didn't feel the adrenalin pumping through me or if I didn't feel nervous, I wouldn't do so well.'

'I stopped giving dinner parties because I just couldn't bear the anxiety about getting everything ready in time. It sometimes got so bad that I'd start worrying days before the event.'

'I can never look forward to a holiday in the sun as it involves flying. It just doesn't suit me. I get clammy hands, my heart races, I feel claustrophobic, and sometimes I just panic and want to escape.'

This booklet is aimed at anyone who suffers from anxiety. It looks into the causes of anxiety, its effects and what to do to reduce it to a manageable level, as well as how to reassure and support friends and relatives with this problem.



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is something we all experience from time to time. Most people can relate to feeling tense, uncertain and perhaps fearful at the thought of sitting an exam, going into hospital, attending an interview or starting a new job. You may worry about feeling uncomfortable, appearing foolish or how successful you will be. In turn, these worries can affect your sleep, appetite and ability to concentrate. If everything goes well, the anxiety will go away.

Short-term anxiety can be useful. Feeling nervous before an exam can make you feel more alert and enhance your performance. However, if the feelings of anxiety overwhelm you, your ability to concentrate and do well may suffer.

Fight or flight

Anxiety and fear are actually important for survival because they act as a mechanism to protect the body against stress or danger. Anxiety and fear trigger the release of hormones such as adrenalin. Adrenalin causes your heart to beat faster in order to carry blood to where it is most needed. You breathe faster to provide extra oxygen, which is needed for energy. You sweat to prevent overheating. Your mouth may feel dry as your digestive system slows down to allow more blood to be deflected to your muscles. Your senses become heightened and your brain becomes more alert. These changes enable the body to take action and protect itself in a dangerous situation, either by running away or fighting a foe. It is known as the 'fight or flight' reaction. Once the danger has passed, other hormones are released, which may cause you to shake as your muscles start to relax.

The response is useful for protecting you against physical dangers. However, your body reacts in the same way to situations that you find threatening but cannot deal with appropriately by fighting or running away. Situations like this may include public speaking, a driving test, or having a blood test.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety can be triggered by a number of factors. Something distressing may have happened to you in the past and because you were unable to deal with the emotions at the time, you may become anxious about encountering the situation again, just in case it stirs up the same feelings of distress.

You may worry about the future. Sometimes, if we feel we are not in control of different aspects of our lives, we can start to feel anxious about the future and any possible events that could be beyond our control, such as nuclear war, fear of being attacked, of developing cancer, or of losing a job. If you find worrying a problem you may be interested in Mind's booklet, *How to Stop Worrying*. (For details of this and other booklets mentioned, see *Further Reading* on p. 10.)

Feeling anxious can also be a learned response – something that you picked up early on. Your family may have tended to see the world as a hostile and fearful place, for example. Caffeine, excess sugar, poor diet, drug misuse, exhaustion, stress and the side-effects of certain medication can also cause anxiety.

After a while, you can start to fear experiencing the symptoms of anxiety, especially feeling out of control. This sets up a vicious circle: you feel anxious because you dread feeling the symptoms of anxiety and then you experience those symptoms because you are having anxious thoughts.



What are the effects of anxiety?

Anxiety affects body and mind. Increased muscular tension can cause discomfort and headaches. Breathing rapidly may make you feel light-headed and shaky, and give you pins and needles. Rising blood pressure can make you more aware of a pounding heart. Changes to the blood supply affecting the digestive system may also cause nausea and sickness. The effects on your nervous system may manifest themselves in an urgent need to visit the toilet, and butterfly feelings in the stomach.

Panic attacks

Sometimes anxiety can take the form of a panic attack: the rapid build-up of overwhelming sensations, such as a pounding heart, feeling faint, sweating, nausea, chest pains, breathing discomfort, feelings of losing control, shaky limbs and legs turning to jelly. You may fear you are going mad, will black out, or are having a heart attack. You may be convinced that you are going to die in the course of the attack, making this a terrifying experience. Sometimes people can't understand why they have had an attack in the first place, and feel as if their mind is totally out of control. More information, about panic attacks can be found in Mind's booklet, *How to Cope with Panic Attacks* (see *Further Reading* p. 10).

The psychological effects of anxiety include fear, heightened alertness, feeling on edge, irritable, unable to relax or concentrate. You may feel an overwhelming desire to seek the reassurance of others, to be weepy and dependent.

The way you think can be affected: you may fear that the worst is going to happen and slot everything that occurs into a pessimistic outlook on life. For example, if a friend is late, you worry that they have had an accident or don't want to see you, when in fact their train was delayed.

Increased alcohol consumption, smoking, phobias and obsessive actions may also be expressions of anxiety. You may try to avoid certain situations and maintain relationships that either support your anxious outlook or help you to avoid situations you find distressing.

Long-term anxiety can affect your health. Your immune system can become less effective, thus making it more difficult to fight off infection. Increased blood pressure can cause heart, kidney and stroke problems. You may experience digestive difficulties along with other health problems, including depression (see Mind's booklet *Understanding Depression*).

You may find it difficult to hold down a job, or to develop and maintain good relationships, or simply enjoy leisure time. Sleep problems may further aggravate anxious feelings and reduce your ability to cope. (See Mind's booklet, *How to Cope with Sleep Problems* details on p. 10.)

How can I manage anxiety?

There are many things you can do to reduce your anxiety to a more manageable level. Taking action may make you feel more anxious at first, even thinking about anxiety can make it worse. But facing up to anxiety and how it makes you feel can be the first step in breaking the cycle of fear and insecurity. It is important to remember how much better you will feel when you begin to relax, take control and are able to lead a fuller life.

The physical symptoms

The symptoms of anxiety can be controlled by breathing techniques, relaxing muscles and by replacing distressing and negative thoughts with positive and peaceful ones. These methods are straightforward and can be learnt from books, video and audio tapes, through cognitive counselling, and attending relaxation classes. There are also some classes specifically for anxiety management. Classes in yoga or meditation can also be quite helpful. (For more information see *Further Reading* on p. 10.)

Medication

Nowadays, doctors should only prescribe tranquillizers or sleeping pills for people suffering from severe or disabling anxiety. Use of these drugs should be limited to the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time, and they should not be taken for more than about four weeks. The medication can't tackle the root cause of the problem, but it can bring some relief until such time as other forms of treatment can be put in place or take effect.

Side-effects can include feeling sluggish or unable to concentrate, and a feeling of not caring about anything. It's possible to become dependent on this kind of medication if it is taken for any length of time, and coming off it may cause withdrawal symptoms. These can seem worse than the original feelings of anxiety. Long-term use of tranquillizers has also been linked with having panic attacks.

GPs sometimes prescribe antidepressants, although there is some indication that these may increase anxiety and problems with sleeping. Once again, they don't deal with the causes of the problem. Doctors may also suggest a patient try a beta blocker to deal with symptoms such as palpitations, although the success of this treatment is variable.

Complementary therapy

Complementary therapies can help you to relax, sleep better, and deal with the symptoms of anxiety. The most common of the complementary therapies are aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbalism, Bach flower remedies, homeopathy, and hypnotherapy.

Many chemists and health shops stock different remedies and may be able to offer advice. (For more information see Mind's booklets, the *A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies* and *Making Sense of Herbal Remedies*.)

Exercise

Taking more exercise can help you cope with anxiety and feelings of tension. And you might get a better night's sleep thrown in as a bonus. Exercise uses up the adrenalin and other hormones that are produced under stress, allowing muscles to relax. Also, certain brain chemicals are released during exercise, which can enhance your mood. Walking and swimming allow you to be active at your own pace and you can do them alone or in company. If you feel embarrassed exercising in front of others, do it indoors: dance, stretch or move along to music or a video (see the *Mind Guide to Physical Activity*).

Assertiveness

Learning how to handle difficult situations and how to stand up for ourselves can make us feel more confident and thereby relaxed. For some people, learning self-defence may make them feel more safe. (see *How to Assert Yourself* and *How to Increase your Self-esteem*).

Counselling and psychotherapy

There are different types of counselling and psychotherapy available. Some help with how you are feeling, others look into reasons why you may be experiencing anxiety. Cognitive therapy encourages you to develop positive ways of thinking and to construct strategies for managing anxiety so you feel in control. (See Mind's factsheets, *Psychotherapy, Counselling, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*, and *Hypnotherapy*, and Mind's booklet, *Understanding Talking Treatments*.)

If you find the strategies suggested in this booklet aren't enabling you to cope, go and see your GP or practice nurse. Ask them whether there is a practice counsellor available. If not, you may be able to access talking treatments on the NHS if your GP refers you. There are also many voluntary organisations offering counselling or psychotherapy. To obtain lists of private practitioners working in your area, contact the relevant organisation listed on p. 9.

How can friends and family help?

Anxiety is something most of us can relate to. For some people, anxiety can be disabling and interfere with their ability to lead full and satisfying lives. Recognising how you feel during times of anxiety can help you empathise with a friend or relative who is going through a bad patch.

People with severe anxiety can often feel bad about themselves and may need reminding that they are not bad people and have many good points. Being supportive is finding a balance between accepting the person and not pushing them into situations that are beyond them, yet at the same time not being too protective but assisting them to overcome small challenges. In this way they can develop their self-confidence and feel in control. Sometimes a bargain can be struck: if the friend agrees to go to relaxation classes, then you will travel with them and meet them afterwards.

If someone is distressed, they may need to be reassured that it is OK to cry. Letting out feelings can relieve tension. Laughter is relaxing; helping your friend to have a good laugh may be one of the most useful things you can do for them. They may also need support in finding appropriate channels to express anger, even if this is just bashing a few cushions about. Some people may be embarrassed at not feeling in control. They may blush or shake, and need reassurance that it is not as obvious to other people as it is to them. Sometimes, physical closeness such as a reassuring touch, hug or even massage can be soothing.

Supporting someone else through emotional problems can be very rewarding, but it can also be very frustrating. Look after yourself, or else you are likely to become impatient with them, and tense and irritable yourself. Finding someone you can confide in might be very useful. If you are living with the person, make sure that you have a break. If their anxiety is stopping them doing things, that does not mean you should stop as well. You should not feel guilty doing things on your own. If you enjoy your life you will find it easier to be loving and supportive. If, on the other hand, your friend feels you are being a martyr, they will feel bad for spoiling your life.

Useful organisations

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies
PO Box 9, Accrington BB5 2GD
tel./fax: 01254 875277, e-mail: info@babcp.com
web: www.babcp.com

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 2PJ
tel. 0870 443 5252, fax: 0870 443 5160
minicom: 0870 443 5162
e-mail: bacp@bacp.co.uk, web: www.counselling.co.uk
Send an A5 SAE for details of practitioners in your area

The British Psychological Society
St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR
tel. 0116 254 9568, fax: 0116 247 0787
e-mail: enquiry@bps.org.uk, web: www.bps.org.uk
Produces a directory of chartered psychologists

First Steps to Freedom
7 Avon Court, School Lane, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2GX
helpline: 01926 851608, tel. 01926 864473, fax: 0870 164 0567
e-mail: info@firststeps.demon.co.uk, web: www.firststeps.demon.co.uk
Offers support, advice and information

National Phobics Society
Zion Community and Resource Centre, 333 Stretford Road, Hulme
Manchester M15 4ZY
tel: 0870 7700 456, fax: 0161 227 9862
e-mail: natphob.soc@good.co.uk, web: www.phobics-society.org.uk
Offers counselling and provides leaflets and information on self-help

No Panic
93 Brands Farm Way, Randlay, Telford, Shropshire TF3 2JQ
helpline: 01952 590545, freephone: 0800 783 1531
fax: 01952 270962, web: www.no-panic.co.uk
Offers advice, information and support

Further reading

- A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Coping with Anxiety and Depression* S. Trickett (Sheldon Press 1997) £6.99
- Essential Help For Your Nerves* C. Weekes (Thorsons 2000) £8.99
- Factsheet: *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* (Mind 1999) 50p
- Factsheet: *Counselling* (Mind 1999) 50p
- Factsheet: *Hypnotherapy* (Mind 1999) 50p
- Factsheet: *Psychotherapy* (Mind 2000) 50p
- How to Assert Yourself* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Deal with Bullying at Work* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Cope with Panic Attacks* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope with Sleep Problems* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope with the Stress of Student Life* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Increase your Self-esteem* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Stop Worrying* (Mind 2001) £1
- Learn to Relax* M. George (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.99
- Making Sense of Herbal Remedies* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Making Sense of Treatments and Drugs: Antidepressants* (Mind 1998) £3.50
- Making Sense of Treatments and Drugs: Minor tranquillizers* (Mind 1998) £3.50
- Manage Your Mind: The mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (OUP 1995) £9.99
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Physical Activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Surviving Working Life* (Mind 1999) £1
- The Mind Guide to Yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Overcoming Anxiety* H. Kennerley (Robinson 1997) £7.99
- Overcoming Low Self-esteem* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Overcoming Panic* D. Silove, V. Manicavasagar (Robinson 1997) £7.99
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Eating Distress* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Obsessive Compulsive Disorder* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Phobias* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1

order form

For a catalogue of publications from Mind, send an A4 SAE to the address below.

If you would like to order any of the titles listed here, please photocopy or tear out these pages, and indicate in the appropriate boxes the number of each title that you require.

Please add 10% for postage and packing, and enclose a cheque for the whole amount, payable to Mind. Return your completed order form together with your cheque to:

Mind Mail Order
15-19 Broadway
London
E15 4BQ
tel. 020 8221 9666
fax: 020 8534 6399
e-mail: publications@mind.org.uk
web: www.mind.org.uk
(Allow 28 days for delivery)

Please send me the titles marked above. I enclose a cheque (including 10% for p&p) payable to Mind for £

Name
Address
Postcode
tel.

Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 0845 7660 163 Mon - Fri 9.15am – 5.15pm.

For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. Typetalk is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via Typetalk dial 0800 959598, fax: 0151 709 8119.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474



This booklet was written by Kaaren Cruse

ISBN 1-874690-93-6

First published by Mind 1989 © Revised edition Mind 2001

No reproduction without permission

Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8519 2122, fax: 020 8522 1725

web: www.mind.org.uk