

# Coping with Anxiety

National Spinal Injuries Centre  
Stoke Mandeville Hospital

Safe & compassionate care,

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## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety problems are very common and can be very distressing. About one person in 10 will seek help from their doctor with anxiety difficulties at some stage in their life. Anxiety affects both the mind and the body. That is, it refers to emotions, thoughts, states of mind and bodily sensations or symptoms.

The following quotes are examples of the thoughts and emotions described by people suffering from anxiety problems:

*"I can't go shopping in town, people will stare at me; just thinking about it makes me feel dizzy and sick. I'd probably faint".*

*"Every time I arrange to go out with friends, I feel panicky. I might have a bladder or bowel accident. I know I would be terrified the whole time, so I cancel the trip".*

*"When I get into a car, my heart starts to race and I can't breathe. I'm sure I'll have a heart attack".*

*I can't go to this interview - they won't be interested in someone like me. They will see how nervous and inadequate I am. I won't get the job, I'll just make a fool of myself".*

*"I feel overwhelmed, I can't cope with all this. I feel so panicky all the time - it's like I'm drowning".*

Anxiety difficulties affect all sorts of people: men and women; old and young; able-bodied and disabled. We all experience anxiety and worry to some extent at times in our life. Emotions associated with anxiety include fear, apprehension, feeling panicky, feeling terrified or scared, and worrying. Physical symptoms of anxiety include muscle tension, sweating, trembling, breathing fast, feeling sick, having diarrhoea, butterflies in the stomach, headaches, feeling dizzy or short of breath, and a racing heart.

How many of these symptoms do you experience?

## When is Anxiety a problem?

Anxiety is a normal, healthy reaction. We all experience anxiety at times of danger or under stressful conditions. Anxiety is associated with changes which prepare your body to respond to a dangerous situation, resulting in all or some of the symptoms described above. These changes can be useful when they occur in moderation because they mean you are primed ready for action and quick response, and you can therefore perform better. For example, a football player who did not get “keyed up” or “psyched up” before a match may not play his best.

However, anxiety can be very distressing and disabling when:

- It occurs when there is no real physical danger, or
- It goes on long after the stress is over, or
- It prevents you from dealing with important problems or concerns.

If the body changes associated with anxiety occur but no physical action is necessary, the bodily sensations feel unpleasant and can begin to interfere with your everyday life. No one can live without experiencing anxiety, it is a normal reaction. However, when it becomes a problem for you, it may be necessary to seek some help with your anxiety symptoms and worries so that you can learn how to manage these differently to reduce the distress caused, and so you can get on with your life.

Some people may not experience specific physical symptoms of anxiety but may feel constantly tense, panicky and overwhelmed by their worries. This person may not be clear as to what they are afraid of. This generalised anxiety can interfere with your ability to problem solve the difficulties you are facing.

## Why do symptoms of Anxiety begin?

Anxiety and tension most often begin through a combination of two things:

**1. Stress** - External demands or events in your life resulting in difficult and stressful circumstances may lead to anxious feelings. This stress may result from several small problems adding together or may arise from a major event such as a serious accident or illness resulting in major changes to your life. After such an event, anxiety may emerge as part of a normal response to the situation.

**2. How you respond to stress** - Individual reactions to external demands are also important in determining how anxious you feel. The way you think, feel and act in response to stress and the methods of coping you have available will affect how anxious you feel. While external sources of stress cannot always be controlled, new responses to them can be learned and these can help you cope better with the stressful situation and feel more in control.

## What keeps Anxiety going?

Once anxiety responses and worries begin, the way you think keeps them going. The way you think then affects your feelings and actions. Three main types of thoughts are important in anxiety:

**1. Thoughts about situations which make you anxious** - When people are anxious they tend to think about situations in a different way from how they would view them if they were calm. Typically, people who experience anxiety in relation to particular events or situations (such as social events, shopping, car travel) think:

- It is very likely that things will go wrong in that situation e.g. *"If I go to the pub, people will stare and I will feel nervous and uncomfortable"*.
- When things go wrong they are likely to go disastrously wrong e.g. *"If I feel nervous, I'll panic and make a complete fool of myself"*.

- It will be difficult or impossible for them to help themselves. That is, they will be unable to cope, e.g. *“I will be so embarrassed, I’ll just sit there looking stupid”*.
- It will also be difficult for anyone else to help them, e.g. *“People will just ignore me. They won’t understand, they’ll just think I’m crazy; they couldn’t help anyway”*.

These sort of thoughts will tend to increase anxiety and tension, leading to a downward spiral. The more anxious you feel, the more anxious thoughts you think and the worse you feel. Quickly, you can feel very anxious and the situation feels very unpleasant and distressing. In fact, people who feel anxious tend to over-estimate the likelihood of things going wrong and under-estimate their ability to cope with the situation if anything did go wrong.

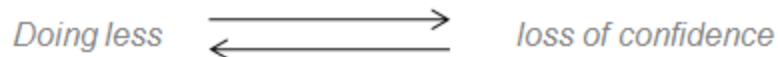
**2. Thoughts about anxiety** - The physical symptoms of anxiety discussed above (e.g. dizziness, nausea, palpitations) can be very frightening. These may understandably make people think that they are experiencing a serious physical illness, going to pieces, losing control of their body, or dying. When people experience anxiety associated with stress related to illness or disability, it may be especially hard for them to know whether what they are feeling is related to their medical condition or to anxiety. Worrying that anxiety symptoms could mean that you are experiencing a serious medical illness causes more anxiety. This brings on more bodily symptoms, resulting in a second downward spiral:

*anxiety symptoms*  $\longleftrightarrow$  *thoughts about anxiety*

In addition, worrying about becoming anxious in a particular situation before you enter that situation can bring on the anxiety symptoms. In fact, although anxiety symptoms feel unpleasant and are distressing, they are not dangerous.

People do not die during an anxiety attack and the symptoms do not do physical harm to your body. However, sometimes a person's response to their anxiety symptoms in an attempt to control them can be problematic, e.g. taking drugs or drinking excessively. Also, symptoms of anxiety or panic, no matter how severe, do not mean you are developing a serious mental disorder or are going insane.

**3. Loss of confidence and avoidance** - Confidence is the belief that you succeed at what you do. This comes from past experience of success. You lose confidence when you find you cannot do things you thought you could do. Anxious thoughts or overwhelming generalised anxiety can make you feel you will not be able to do things which you have previously done easily, or that you will fail at new activities. This can lead to you avoiding things which you think might be difficult. This then leads to a third downward spiral. The less you do, the more you lose confidence, and the less you feel able to do leads to further loss of confidence.



This can be particularly important when anxiety occurs in association with an actual change in your physical capabilities, such as developing a chronic illness or acquiring a disability. In such situations you may find that some activities are more difficult than they used to be or you may need to learn new ways of doing things. This is a great challenge for anyone and it is natural to feel some loss of confidence at such times. It is, however, important to work on rebuilding that confidence rather than avoiding activities because they seem difficult. Avoidance leads to the above downward spiral and helps to keep anxiety going. Anxiety prevents you from building up confidence in new and old activities, and learning that you can rebuild your life.

Often situations seem very difficult and frightening, e.g. going to hydrotherapy for the first time after becoming paralysed. However, when you face the situation and “give it a go”, it is often not as bad as you thought it might be.

### How can Anxiety be controlled?

To effectively control anxiety in the long term and help you cope better with stress, it is helpful to learn to control the anxious thoughts that keep anxiety going (see above) and break all three of the downward spirals described.

This involves three steps:

Step 1 - Recognising anxious thoughts;

Step 2 - Finding more realistic and helpful alternatives;

Step 3 - Testing the thoughts in action.

If you feel overwhelmed by anxieties and fears, it is important to try to break down this feeling of being swamped by defining and specifying what your concerns are.

In addition, there are several other things that can be helpful:

- Learning to deal with situations of extreme anxiety or panic, including using distraction techniques;
- Learning to relax;
- Building up confidence.

A clinical psychologist/other qualified therapist will be able to help you learn to control your anxiety using these techniques. The procedures involved are outlined below. To ensure these ideas make sense to you and so that you can think about how to apply them to your own difficulties (no two people are the same), you should discuss your treatment with a qualified therapist.

## Controlling anxious thoughts

### Step 1: Recognising anxious thoughts

Anxious thoughts may take the form of words or images. For example, the thought *“I will fail, everything will go wrong, I can't do this”*, or a mental picture of something terrible happening. Such images often seem quite real and may be bizarre and dreamlike.

Ask yourself: *“What thoughts and images go through my mind when I feel tense or anxious. Do thoughts or images increase my anxiety? What are they?”*

You may find it difficult to identify thoughts or images associated with anxiety. This is because at times these thoughts:

- Flash through your mind so quickly that you are barely aware of them. The anxious feelings associated with these thoughts then seem to be out of the blue, inexplicable, confusing and frightening;
- Are automatic, they appear without effort, like a habit. You are so familiar with the thought that you don't register it;
- May be difficult to work out when you are calm.

For these reasons, it is easiest to learn to recognise anxious thoughts in the situation where you feel anxious. Writing thoughts down at the time using a diary is one way of doing this but this can be difficult for some people with a physical disability. You should discuss with your therapist ways in which you might learn how to identify your anxious thoughts. This is a skill, and learning to do it takes time and practice.

It may also be difficult to identify your anxious thoughts if you experience a sense of free floating anxiety. In this instance, it is necessary to obtain some help from your therapist in breaking this down into specific concerns before you will be able to identify your anxious thoughts in detail.



### Step 2: Finding alternatives (challenges) to anxious thoughts

Once you are able to identify your anxious thoughts and images, the next step is to examine whether there are other more helpful ways of looking at the situation. Finding alternatives to your anxious thoughts is not easy at first but this can help to break the downward spirals described previously.

Anxious thoughts are rarely helpful; they make you feel bad, they produce physical anxiety symptoms, they may represent an exaggerated or distorted view of the facts, and they tend to block your ability to achieve your goals and thus feel good about yourself.

A good alternative to an anxious thought:

- Fits the facts;
- Reduces your belief in your anxious thoughts and changes the way you think;
- Makes you feel better;
- Makes it easier for you to do what you want to do.

The following questions can be helpful in looking for alternatives to anxious thoughts or worries ...

#### **What is the evidence?**

Just because you think something doesn't make it true, would other people accept your thoughts as true?

#### **What alternative views are there?**

There are many ways of viewing a particular situation. How would other people look at your concerns? What advice would you give a friend who came to you describing your situation?

### What is the worst that could happen?

What are you really afraid of? If you put your fears into words, it may be possible to see whether they are in fact so exaggerated as to be impossible. Also, what you fear may be less likely to happen than you might predict and even if it did happen, you may have many skills to cope in that situation. Thinking about what it is you fear happening allows you to evaluate the possibility of it occurring, plan how you might cope and see if there is any action you could take to reduce the chances of the worst happening. This helps to put your fears into a manageable perspective.

### What can I do about it?

When people feel anxious, the emotions can be very overwhelming. In these circumstances they tend to think there is nothing they or anyone else can do to help them. Asking “*what can I do about it?*” helps to challenge these thoughts. Here are some questions to help you identify what you might be able to do:

Personal skills “*What skills or knowledge do I have to help me deal with this situation?*”

Past experience “*Do I have past experience of dealing with similar problems?*”

Support “*What help, advice and support can other people give me?*”

Information “*Is there any information I could get to help me deal better with this?*”

Do something “*What can I do to change the situation itself?*”

Change something “*If I can't change the situation, what can I do to change my thoughts and feelings about it?*”

An example ... **anxious thoughts:**

People with disability cannot manage in social situations.

*“I can't cope with lots of people, I will embarrass myself. There's no point in me going to this party.”*

### **Possible alternatives**

*"Although I have felt embarrassed in some social situations, I have managed to enjoy myself at times. I know lots of people with disabilities who have a great social life. I suppose other people might say I find parties difficult because of my anxiety, not my disability. I suppose what I'm afraid of is that people will make comments about my wheelchair or treat me like I'm stupid and I won't be able to handle it. Perhaps that's not really likely; people are generally quite understanding and if anyone did say anything, that just shows their ignorance not mine! In any case, my brother will be there - he can help me if there is a problem".*

Challenging your anxious thoughts is again a skill and may be difficult to do when you feel distressed. It may be necessary to record or remember the thoughts and come back to them later. See later on in this section for how to deal with panic.

### **Step 3: Behavioural experiments**

The third step in controlling anxiety is to test out your anxious thoughts in action by behaving differently. That is, by trying out or experiencing the things that anxiety or worry tend to encourage you to avoid.

### **Learning to face difficult situations**

Thoughts about situations that make you anxious can be tested by learning to face those situations.

### **Controlling physical symptoms**

Thoughts about feeling anxious can be tested by learning to control the physical symptoms of anxiety through relaxation, controlled breathing, distraction and panic management (see further on in this section).

### **Pick yourself up again**

Loss of confidence can be tested by picking up activities you have dropped and by taking an active role in your own treatment. Ask yourself *“what activities do I no longer do because of my anxiety?”*. Try doing some of these again.

Changing your behaviour is not easy. Facing a situation you feel worried about involves a psychological risk. Without taking risks, such as doing something for the first time, none of us can learn to handle situations. Situations where you act differently to challenge your anxious thoughts should be set up as experiments with you testing a specific prediction about what you believe will happen if you act in that way. It's important that each experiment is a learning experience and that you don't put yourself in a no-win situation. You should discuss these behavioural experiments with your therapist.

### **Learning to control physical symptoms of Anxiety**

**Relaxation:** Your therapist can help you learn specific relaxation techniques. These are designed to help you discover how it feels to be totally relaxed and identify the physical signs of anxiety when they appear. Relaxation is a skill and takes time and practice to learn. In addition, planning relaxing activities is also helpful. Different things are relaxing to different people. You should try to plan something relaxing each day and make a note of the effect this has on the way you feel. This will help you notice which activities are particularly effective in helping you relax.

**Distraction:** When you are very anxious, it is difficult to stop yourself thinking about how you feel, resulting in the downward spirals described above. At these times, distraction can help. Distracting yourself can make you feel calmer and you will then be more able to examine your thoughts and challenge them, rather than feel overwhelmed by them.

Ways of distracting yourself include:

Concentrating on what is happening around you e.g. choose an object near you and describe it to yourself in great detail, or give yourself a specific task such as counting all the blue objects you can see.

Mental activity such as arithmetic, reciting a poem or doing a crossword. You could focus on memories or fantasies that are pleasant e.g. what you would do if you won the lottery.

Physical activity such as sport, physical exercise or other physical tasks. Try to choose something that will focus your mind as well as your body.

Distraction is a skill; it takes time to practice it and to recognise which methods are most helpful to you. Distraction will help you reduce anxiety on a short-term basis. You should guard against using it as a way of avoiding problems you need to think through.

**Panic management:** When anxiety is very strong, it is difficult to think clearly so it is helpful to have thoughts about how to manage this in advance. It is important that you learn to recognise the early signs of anxiety; your therapist can help you learn to do this.

When you notice your anxiety symptoms beginning, e.g. shortness of breath, sweating etc:

- Identify to yourself that you are having anxiety problems and make some positive statements to yourself ...

*"Nothing terrible will happen to me - feelings of panic are normal bodily sensations".*

*"This is an opportunity to practice my coping skills. I will be okay".*

It may be useful to write these positive statements on cards to carry with you and look at when you feel bad.

- Next, begin to regulate your breathing, concentrating on breathing slowly in, and slowly out. Keep a regular rhythm, don't breathe too deeply or too fast; use your abdominal muscles to breathe where possible. When you exhale, say to yourself "relax" or "calm".
- Now try to notice any tension in your body and allow that tension to flow out of your body - try to picture your body becoming floppy, heavy, comfortable and relaxed.
- Try to imagine yourself mentally in a place where you feel very happy and relaxed; try to think what that might feel like. Concentrate on feelings of relaxation.
- If it is difficult for you to put yourself in a relaxing place in your mind, try distracting yourself by maybe reciting a poem or prayer to yourself or by counting, for instance, all the blue objects in the room.
- Keep telling yourself that the feelings of panic will pass - they always have before. Try to accept that this is happening and don't run away - the fear will pass if you stay where you are.
- As you begin to feel calmer, try to work out what was going through your mind, what might have triggered the panic. Identify any negative thoughts and challenge them as best you can. If you have difficulty, write the thoughts down if you can and come back to them later.

- When you feel calm again, congratulate yourself - you have coped! Beware of any negative thoughts you might have about what you should have done differently, ask instead: *“What have I learned from this experience? How will this help me cope better in the future?”*
- The more you learn to be aware of anxiety symptoms and identify them at an early stage, the easier it will be for you to do something earlier on to prevent panic escalating.

## Concerns

If you have any concerns about the treatment and rehabilitation you receive or about your experience at the NSIC, please raise them with a member of staff.

If you are particularly happy about the service you have received at the NSIC, you are welcome to let us know, preferably in writing. All NHS Trusts have a commitment to monitor and improve the quality of their services and therefore comments from users of those services are especially helpful.

## **How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?**

Infection control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. We ask that you, and anyone visiting you, use the hand sanitiser available at the entrance to every ward before coming in to or after leaving the ward. In some situations hands may need to be washed at the sink using soap and water rather than using the hand sanitiser. Staff will let you know if this is the case.

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If you require a translation of this leaflet please call  
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Author: Clinical Psychology  
Issue date: Dec 2014  
Review date: Dec 2017

Leaflet code:  
Version: 1