

When anxiety becomes a problem for you

Anxiety is a normal reaction to a stressful situation and everyone experiences anxiety at some time in their lives, for instance, when taking an exam. In fact anxiety developed as a basic survival system to help us cope with dangerous situations. Anxiety triggers a “fight” or “flight” physiological response to allow our bodies to react to a threat. For example, when you encounter something stressful you might notice that your heart starts to beat faster: this is so that blood can be carried faster to your muscles and brain in order to prepare you for action. This system is still triggered when we view something as stressful even though we usually are not in a life-threatening situation and when it is not always helpful to run away from a situation.

Anxiety can become a problem for you when it becomes more severe, continues for a long period, when you start to worry about what the symptoms of anxiety you are experiencing might mean and/or when it gets in the way of things you want to be doing.

Recognising the signs of anxiety

Anxiety tends to consist of a mixture of:

Emotions: feeling anxious, scared, tense, apprehensive, panicky, unreal or irritable.

Thoughts: such as racing thoughts with difficulty concentrating, worrying intensely, catastrophizing that something terrible will or has happened, fearing you have a physical health problem or are going to be harmed in some way, thinking you cannot cope, are losing control or are going to look stupid and/or wanting to escape.

Bodily sensations: may include palpitations, butterflies in your stomach, sweating, shallow breathing or gasping, feeling dizzy or sick, shaking, feeling jumpy, tight-chested.

Behaviours: for instance avoiding situations, seeking reassurance, restlessness, being vigilant for possible danger, using or increasing your use of alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to cope, being irritable with or demanding of others.

Choosing your therapist:

A good starting point could be to talk to your GP. CBT is available within the NHS for many anxiety disorders although there may be a wait before you can access therapy. You may want to consider private therapy instead. As well as finding someone with whom you can form an effective working relationship it is important to ensure your therapist is properly trained in CBT. The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) is the lead organisation for CBT and accredits therapists who demonstrate a high level of training and supervision for their clinical work. A directory of accredited therapists is available from www.cbtregister.com.

Hillside Psychological Services Ltd take referrals directly from members of the public, and from GPs, insurance providers, solicitors, employers, psychiatrists, etc.

Please see our website for more details or contact us:

Lead therapist: **Dr Heather Bennett**
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Anxiety

How you can recognise the signs
and what you can do about it

**Compassionate, flexible care from highly
skilled and experienced practitioners**

Based in Hagley and serving Worcestershire, the
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Types of anxiety difficulties you might suffer from:

Anxiety difficulties are extremely common—around 5% of us will experience a diagnosable anxiety disorder each year and another 10% will experience mixed anxiety and depression. Many more of us will suffer from lower levels of anxiety that may still cause us distress or interfere with our day-to-day lives.

Anxiety can be in the form of a lingering sense of apprehension or tendency to worry over many aspects of your life (known as “Generalised Anxiety Disorder”) or can be more specific, such as:

- **Agoraphobia**—finding it extremely uncomfortable to be in unfamiliar or open places which can lead to an avoidance of going out.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** — experiencing distress from unwanted, intrusive thoughts and/or feeling that you need to do certain things over and over, in a particular way.
- **Panic Disorder**—experiencing sudden, highly unpleasant, intense anxiety attacks.
- **Specific Phobias**—an extreme fear or aversion to a particular thing, or group of things.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** — an anxiety disorder triggered by experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event; this might include you suffering from flashbacks or nightmares and fearing or avoiding things which you associate with the event.
- **Social Phobia and Shyness**—a fear of being around people, usually associated with a concern that you will be judged negatively in some way.
- **Stress**— tension caused by feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with demands placed on you.

Causes of anxiety difficulties:

For some of us clear reasons can be identified as the cause of your anxiety problem, for example, experiencing a traumatic life event or a big life change, such as facing redundancy, financial worries or suffering a bereavement. For others anxiety problems might run in your family or you might always have had a shy or anxious personality. Others might develop anxiety difficulties after suffering from a physical health problem that might have affected your confidence or ability to cope. Different people might have had to cope with difficult early life experiences that may increase your vulnerability to developing mental health problems in later life.

Overcoming your anxiety problem:

Most anxiety disorders will get better within around 18 months. Some difficulties persist, often for many years.

Things you can do to help yourself:

- Make **positive lifestyle choices**, for instance, eat a balanced diet, keep as active as possible, try to get enough sleep, cut down on caffeine, keep your alcohol intake within healthy levels, give up/cut down on smoking if possible and avoid drugs.
- Take time out and learn how to **relax**. You could learn a skill such as “mindfulness”, developed from the Buddhist practice of meditation, which has been found to have positive effects in helping people to overcome anxiety and mood difficulties.
- Try to identify triggers that increase your anxiety and find helpful ways of dealing with these, e.g., by learning how to **problem solve** situations rather than worrying or avoiding them. You could discuss difficulties with someone you trust. You may also need to find some ways to address situations that are repeatedly causing you stress, such as problems at work or school or within relationships.
- Look at reputable **resources** for suggestions of helpful coping strategies. Try Anxiety UK’s website (www.anxietyuk.org.uk) or read books written by expert practitioners, such as “Overcoming Anxiety: A self-help book using cognitive behavioural techniques” by Helen Kennerley.

What treatment is available for your anxiety difficulties?

Psychological therapy: Although other therapies are available, the government’s National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) specifically recommends the use of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) for anxiety disorders as this approach has the most evidence that it is effective for anxiety disorders. CBT can be helpful for children, adolescents and adults of any age.

CBT is a talking therapy and involves you regularly meeting with a therapist, or completing therapy tasks on-line, for a number of weeks. CBT therapy is likely to involve you:

- Learning about the nature of anxiety.
- Working with your therapist to identify how your difficulties are likely to have developed and are being maintained.
- Addressing any unhelpful thinking patterns that are linked with your anxiety difficulty.
- Addressing any unhelpful behavioural patterns that you might have developed, such as avoiding certain situations or other things that make you feel safer in the immediate situation but might be maintaining your anxiety in the longer term.
- Learning relaxation or mindfulness techniques.

Medication: Your GP may consider prescribing you some medication for your anxiety if it becomes more severe. This is most likely to be an anti-depressant medication. Previously benzodiazepines, such as diazepam (Valium), were used, however, these have been found to be addictive and are not usually helpful to take beyond a few days.



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