Mind e-booklet
Anxiety

Anxiety and panic attacks

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What is anxiety?

This section explains what we mean by anxiety, and when it can become a mental health problem.

> You know that feeling when you're rocking on the back legs of your chair and suddenly for just a split second you think you're about to fall? Imagine that split second feeling being frozen in time and lodged in your chest for days, and imagine with it that sense of impending doom and dread sticking around too, but sometimes you don't even know why.

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When is anxiety a mental health problem?

Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future.

Anxiety is a natural human response when we perceive that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts and feelings, and through physical sensations.

Most people feel anxious at times. It's particularly common to experience some anxiety while coping with stressful events or changes, especially if they could have a big impact on your life.

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Anxiety can become a mental health problem if it impacts on your ability to live your life as fully as you want to. For example, it may be a problem for you if:

- your feelings of anxiety are very strong or last for a long time
- your fears or worries are out of proportion to the situation
- you avoid situations that might cause you to feel anxious
- your worries feel very distressing or are hard to control
- you regularly experience symptoms of anxiety, which could include panic attacks (see p.22)
- you find it hard to go about your everyday life or do the things that you enjoy.

If your symptoms fit a certain set of medical criteria then you might be diagnosed with a particular anxiety disorder (see p.16). But it is also possible to experience problems with anxiety without having any specific diagnosis.

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The 'fight, flight or freeze' response

Like all animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from danger. When we feel under threat our bodies react by releasing certain hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones:

- make us feel more alert, so we can act faster
- make our hearts beat faster, quickly sending blood to where it's needed most.

After we feel the threat has passed, our bodies release other hormones to help our muscles relax. This can sometimes cause us to shake.

This is commonly called the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. It is something that happens automatically in our bodies, and we have no control over it.

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What does anxiety feel like?

This section describes some common signs and symptoms of anxiety.

You might experience some of the things listed in this section, and you might also have other experiences. Anxiety can feel different for different people.

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> **For me it's like a swarm of bees just buzzing buzzing buzzing, not stopping, making it impossible to focus and seemingly impossible to slow down and take a breath.**

The effects of anxiety on your body can include:

- a churning feeling in your stomach
- feeling light-headed or dizzy
- pins and needles
- feeling restless or unable to sit still
- headaches, backache or other aches and pains
- faster breathing
- a fast, thumping or irregular heartbeat
- sweating or hot flushes
- problems sleeping
- grinding your teeth, especially at night
- nausea (feeling sick)
- needing the toilet more or less often
- changes in your sex drive
- having panic attacks (see p.22).

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The effects of anxiety on your mind can include:

- feeling tense, nervous or unable to relax
- having a sense of dread, or fearing the worst
- feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down
- feeling like other people can see you're anxious and are looking at you
- feeling like you can't stop worrying, or that bad things will happen if you stop worrying
- worrying a lot about things that might happen in the future
- worrying about anxiety itself, for example worrying about when panic attacks might happen
- worrying that you're losing touch with reality
- wanting lots of reassurance from other people, or worrying that people are angry or upset with you
- rumination (thinking a lot about bad experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again)
- depersonalisation (feeling disconnected from your mind or your body, or like you're watching someone else)
- derealisation (feeling disconnected from the world around you, or like the world isn't real).

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Anxiety and physical health problems

Some studies suggest that experiencing anxiety could increase the risk of developing certain long-term physical health problems, including diabetes, stomach ulcers and heart problems. But there is not enough evidence to say for sure exactly what the risks are, or what groups of people are most likely to be affected.

Having a physical illness or disability can also make you feel stressed and anxious, so it might sometimes feel like your anxiety problems and physical health problems are part of a vicious circle.

Sometimes it might be difficult to work out whether some symptoms are totally related to anxiety, or might be related to a different illness. If you're experiencing any physical symptoms it is best to talk to your GP, so they can check out what may be causing them.

> "I constantly thought that I was dying of undiagnosed illnesses, because I was convinced that the physical symptoms were too bad to be 'just anxiety'."

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How else might anxiety affect my life?

Anxiety symptoms can last for a long time, or may come and go. You might find you have difficulty with day-to-day aspects of your life, such as:

- looking after yourself
- holding down a job
- forming or maintaining relationships
- trying new things
- simply enjoying your leisure time.

In some cases anxiety can have a serious impact on your ability to work. And if you drive you may have to tell the DVLA that you have anxiety.

Visit **mind.org.uk/rights** for more detailed information about your legal rights at work and your right to drive.

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What causes anxiety problems?

No one knows exactly what causes anxiety problems, but there are probably lots of factors involved.

This section describes some things which may make you more vulnerable to developing problems with anxiety and panic.

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Past or childhood experiences

Difficult experiences in childhood, adolescence or adulthood are a common trigger for anxiety problems. Going through stress and trauma is likely to have a particularly big impact if it happens to you when you are very young.

Experiences which can trigger anxiety problems include things like:

- physical or emotional abuse
- neglect
- losing a parent
- being bullied or being socially excluded.

Having parents who don't treat you warmly, are overprotective or are emotionally inconsistent can also be a factor.

Can anxiety problems be inherited genetically?

Research shows that having a close relative with anxiety problems does increase your chance of experiencing anxiety problems yourself. But at the moment there's not enough evidence to say whether this is because we share some specific genetic factors, or because we learn particular ways of thinking and behaving from our parents and other family members as we grow up.

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Your current life situation

Current issues or problems in your life can also trigger anxiety, such as:

- exhaustion or a build up of stress
- long working hours
- being out of work
- feeling under pressure while studying or in work
- having money problems
- homelessness or housing problems
- losing someone close to you
- feeling lonely or isolated
- being bullied, harassed or abused.

> **I have recently realised that I spend money when anxious, which in turn makes me feel anxious about how much I'm spending.**

Drugs and medication

Anxiety can sometimes be a side effect of taking:

- some psychiatric medications (such as some antidepressants)
- some medications for physical health problems
- recreational drugs or alcohol.

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Diet

Some types of food or drink can trigger symptoms of anxiety or panic, or make them worse. These include sugar and caffeine.

Visit **mind.org.uk/food** to find more information about the relationship between what you eat and how you feel.

Physical or mental health problems

Other health problems can sometimes cause anxiety, or might make it worse. For example:

- Physical health problems – living with a serious, ongoing or life-threatening physical health condition can sometimes trigger anxiety problems.
- Other mental health problems – it's also common to develop anxiety while living with other mental health problems, such as depression.

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What anxiety disorders are there?

Anxiety can be felt in lots of different ways.

If your experiences meet certain criteria your doctor might diagnose you with a specific anxiety disorder. This section describes some commonly diagnosed anxiety disorders.

You might not have, or want, a diagnosis of a particular anxiety disorder. But it might still be useful to learn more about these different diagnoses to help you think about your own experiences of anxiety, and consider options for support.

Visit **mind.org.uk/info** for more detailed information about depression, phobias, PTSD, OCD, BDD and perinatal mental health problems, including options for care and support.

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Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

This means having regular or uncontrollable worries about many different things in your everyday life. This can be quite a broad diagnosis, meaning that the problems you experience with GAD might be quite different from another person's experiences.

Mixed anxiety and depressive disorder

It's very common to experience anxiety alongside other mental health problems, such as depression or suicidal feelings. If you have symptoms of both anxiety and depression but don't fit one more clearly than the other, you might be given this diagnosis.

> I have generalised anxiety disorder and depression which seem to come in cycles. It is the unexpected attacks that I find the hardest.

Social anxiety disorder

This means you experience extreme fear or anxiety triggered by social situations (such as parties, workplaces, or any situation in which you have to talk to another person). It is also known as social phobia.

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Phobias

A phobia is an extreme fear or anxiety triggered by a particular situation (such as social situations) or a particular object (such as spiders). A fear becomes a phobia if the fear is out of proportion to the risk of danger, it lasts for more than six months, and has a significant impact on how you live your day-to-day life.

Panic disorder

This means having regular or frequent panic attacks without a clear cause or trigger. Experiencing panic disorder can mean that you feel constantly afraid of having another panic attack, to the point that this fear itself can trigger your panic attacks. It is common to experience panic disorder and agoraphobia (a type of phobia) together. See p.22 for more on panic attacks.

Some research suggests that people who have panic disorder might be very sensitive to sensory experiences (such as sunlight, smells and changes in the weather), but there's not enough evidence yet to say for sure. It's also not clear whether having a high level of sensitivity to these sorts of things is something that might cause you to develop panic disorder, or whether it may be an effect of having it.

> "Never knowing when I was going to have a panic attack was the worst feeling in the world."

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Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

This is a diagnosis you may be given if you develop anxiety problems after going through something you found traumatic. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares which can feel like you're re-living all the fear and anxiety you experienced during the actual event.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

You may be given this diagnosis if your anxiety problems involve having obsessions (unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind) and compulsions (repetitive activities that you feel you have to do to reduce the anxiety caused by the obsession).

Health anxiety

This diagnosis means you experience obsessions and compulsions relating to illness, including researching symptoms or checking to see if you have them. It is related to OCD.

> "I would seek medical reassurance online and for a day or so I could breathe a sigh of relief... but then the doubt would set in and I started the process again."

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Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)

This is an anxiety disorder related to body image. You may be diagnosed with BDD if you experience obsessions and compulsions relating to your physical appearance.

Perinatal anxiety or perinatal OCD

Some women develop perinatal anxiety problems or perinatal OCD. This means they develop during pregnancy or in the first year after giving birth. You might also hear this described as prenatal anxiety (before giving birth) or postnatal anxiety (after giving birth).

Anxiety problems are sometimes also talked about as being part of postnatal depression (PND).

> **I thought I was a horrible failure... I'd panic that they thought I would hurt him and then take him away. I would watch him constantly and not sleep to make sure nothing happened to him.**

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What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are a common experience associated with anxiety problems. This sections explains a bit more about them.

> I can't sleep due to panic attacks and nightmares. When I fall asleep within an hour I am up, soaked, heart racing and shaking.

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Panic attacks are a type of fear response. They're an exaggeration of your body's normal response to danger, stress or excitement.

During a panic attack, physical symptoms can build up very quickly. These can include:

- a pounding or racing heartbeat
- feeling faint, dizzy or light-headed
- feeling very hot or very cold
- sweating, trembling or shaking
- nausea (feeling sick)
- pain in your chest or abdomen
- struggling to breathe or feeling like you're choking
- feeling like your legs are shaky or are turning to jelly
- feeling disconnected from your mind, body or surroundings (these are types of dissociation).

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that you're:

- losing control
- going to faint
- having a heart attack
- going to die.

You might find that you become scared of going out alone or to public places because you're worried about having another panic attack. If this fear becomes very intense, it may be called agoraphobia.

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> My teeth would chatter uncontrollably and my whole body [would] tremble, I would hyperventilate and cry with panic as the feeling that I was going to fall unconscious was so convincing.

When might panic attacks happen?

Panic attacks can happen during the day or night. Some people have one panic attack then don't ever experience another, or you might find that you have them regularly, or several in a short space of time. You might notice that particular places, situations or activities seem to trigger panic attacks. For example, they might happen before a stressful appointment.

Most panic attacks last between 5–20 minutes. They can come on very quickly. Your symptoms will usually peak (be at their worst) within 10 minutes. You might also experience symptoms of a panic attack over a longer period of time. This could be because you're having a second panic attack, or you're experiencing other symptoms of anxiety which feel similar.

What can I do if I have a panic attack?

Panic attacks can be frightening but there are things you can do to cope with them. It might help to cut out or copy the tips on p.25 and keep them somewhere easy to find, such as in your wallet or bedside table.

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During a panic attack

You could try to:

- Focus on your breathing. Concentrate on breathing slowly in and out while counting in your head: one, two, three, four, five (repeat).
- Stamp on the spot. Some people find this helps control their breathing.
- Ground yourself through your senses. This can be especially useful if you feel dissociated (disconnected from the world) during a panic attack. For example, you could:
  - taste mint-flavoured sweets or gum
  - touch something cold, smooth or soft
  - sniff something with a strong smell
  - listen closely to any sounds.

It might help to keep a few items to touch, smell or taste with you in your bag or pocket. If you already know other tips that help you, add them to this list.

When the attack is over

Think about self-care. It's important to pay attention to what your body needs after you've had a panic attack. For example, you might need to rest somewhere quietly to recover, or eat or drink something.

Tell someone you trust. If you feel able to, it could help to let someone know you've had a panic attack. You could mention how they might notice if you're having another one, and how you'd like them to help you.

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How can I help myself cope with anxiety?

Living with anxiety can be very difficult, but there are things you can do for yourself that might help.

This section has some suggestions for you to consider.

Visit **mind.org.uk/lifestyle** for more information and tips on topics such as sleep, food, nature, stress, relaxation, exercise, mindfulness, working life and student life.

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Talk to someone you trust

Talking to someone you trust about what's making you anxious could be a relief. It may be that just having someone listen to you and show they care can help in itself. If you aren't able to open up to someone close to you, **Samaritans** and **Anxiety UK** both run helplines that you can call to talk to someone (see pp.53–55 for contact details).

Try to manage your worries

It can be really hard to stop worrying when you have anxiety. You might have worries you can't control. Or you might feel like you need to keep worrying because it feels useful – or that bad things might happen if you stop.

It can be helpful to try different ways of addressing these worries. For example, you could:

- set aside a specific time to focus on your worries – so you can reassure yourself you haven't forgotten to think about them. Some people find it helps to set a timer
- write down your worries and keep them in a particular place. For example, you could write them in a notebook, or on pieces of paper you put in an envelope or jar.

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Keep a diary

- It might help to make a note of what happens when you get anxious or have a panic attack. This could help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you, or notice early signs that they are beginning to happen.

- You could also make a note of what's going well. Living with anxiety can mean you think a lot about things that worry you or are hard to do. It's important to be kind to yourself and notice the good things as well.

> I keep a photo diary of all the things I've managed to do. It makes me think 'I can do this'. So when I go and sit in a café, or go for a walk, I take a pic to record that I've done it, and look back when I feel scared...
> it encourages me that maybe I can do something [again] if I've done it before.

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Make time to be kind to yourself

- Try some relaxation techniques – you may already know what helps you relax, like having a bath, listening to music or taking your dog for a walk. If you know that a certain activity helps you feel more relaxed, make sure you set aside time to do it. You could try a breathing exercise such as the one on p.31.

- Get into nature – spending time in green spaces (sometimes called 'ecotherapy') has been found to reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. Even if you don't have a garden or aren't very mobile, caring for plants or animals indoors can still help you get some benefits from nature.

- Consider mindfulness – mindfulness is a way of giving your full attention to the present moment. Some people say they find this helps them manage anxiety, but be aware that it could also make you feel worse – particularly if keeping a busy mind is an important way of coping for you. For example, it's not recommended for social anxiety. It's best to try it with a trained professional if possible, or to get advice from a doctor or therapist before trying it by yourself.

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A breathing exercise to try

Learning to breathe more deeply can help you feel a lot calmer. Try practising this technique:

- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to keep your shoulders down and relaxed, and place your hand on your stomach – it should rise as you breathe in and fall as you breathe out.
- Count as you breathe. Start by counting 'one, two, three, four' as you breathe in and 'one, two, three, four' as you breathe out. Try to work out what's comfortable for you.

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Look after your physical health

- Try to get enough sleep. Sleep can give you the energy to cope with difficult feelings and experiences.
- Think about your diet. Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels.
- Try to do some physical activity. Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing.

Try peer support

Peer support brings together people who've had similar experiences to support each other. Many people find it helps them to share ideas about how to stay well, connect with others and feel less alone. You could:

- Contact a specialist organisation. For example, you can find details of support groups, forums and helplines on the **Anxiety Care UK**, **Anxiety UK**, **No More Panic**, **No Panic** and **Triumph Over Phobia UK** websites (contact details on pp.53–55).
- Join Elefriends, Mind's supportive online community (see p.50).
- Contact Mind's Infoline and ask about local support groups near you (see p.50).

Visit **mind.org.uk/peersupport** for more information about peer support, and how to find support that works for you.

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Complementary and alternative therapies

Yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbal remedies and hypnotherapy are all types of complementary therapy that you could try, and see if they work for you.

The evidence behind these options isn't as strong as for more formal treatments (see p.34), but lots of people still find that one or more of these methods helps them to relax, sleep better, and feel more able to cope day-to-day. Many chemists and health shops stock different remedies, and should be able to offer advice about them.

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What treatments are available?

There are various evidence-based treatments which have been found to help with anxiety problems and panic disorders. This section explains the main kinds of treatment you might be offered through the NHS, including therapies, medication and self-help resources.

Visit **mind.org.uk/treatments** for more detailed information about talking therapies, medication and other treatment options.

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> I take medication and this helps, but I have also had online CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] which was invaluable and CAT [cognitive analytic therapy] as an outpatient at a psychiatric hospital. Talking cures are fantastic tools.

Self-help resources

A self-help resource might be the first treatment option your doctor offers you. This is because it's available quite quickly, and there's a chance it could help you to feel better without needing to try other options.

Self-help could be delivered through:

- Workbooks. For example, your GP might recommend particular titles from a **Reading Well** scheme called 'Books on Prescription'. This scheme is supported by most local libraries, so you can go and check the books out for free – you don't actually need a prescription from a doctor. Their website has more information (details on p.55).

- A computer-based CBT programme for treating anxiety, panic and phobias. There are several app-based CBT courses recommended on the **NHS apps library** (details on p.54), which you can search to find an app that may work for you.

You might be offered a resource to work through your own, or on a course with other people who experience similar difficulties.

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Talking treatments

If self-help resources aren't likely to help with the anxiety problems you're experiencing, or you've already tried them and they haven't helped, your doctor should offer you a talking treatment. There are two types of talking treatment recommended for anxiety and panic:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – this focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behaviour, and teaches you coping skills for dealing with different problems.
- Applied relaxation therapy – this involves learning how to relax your muscles in situations where you normally experience anxiety.

> "I was diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder, depression and OCD traits. I had cognitive behavioural therapy for almost a year, which was very helpful."

Medication

Your doctor might offer to prescribe you medication to help manage some symptoms, but medication shouldn't be the only thing they offer. Some people find it helpful to try talking treatments and medication at the same time.

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What types of medication might I be offered?

- Antidepressants. Usually this will be a type called a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), but these drugs can sometimes cause side effects such as sleeping problems or feeling more anxious than you did before. If SSRIs don't work or aren't suitable you may be offered a different kind called a tricyclic antidepressant.

- Pregabalin. In some cases, such as if you have a diagnosis of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), your doctor may decide to prescribe this. It's an antiseizure drug which is normally used to treat epilepsy (a neurological disorder that can cause seizures), but is also licensed to treat anxiety.

- Beta-blockers. Beta-blockers are sometimes used to treat the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a rapid heartbeat, palpitations and tremors (shaking). They aren't psychiatric drugs, so they won't help with psychological symptoms, but they may be helpful in certain situations (such as if you have to face a phobia).

- Benzodiazepine tranquillisers. If you experience very severe anxiety that is having a significant impact on your day-to-day life, you may be offered a benzodiazepine. But these drugs can cause unpleasant side effects and they can become addictive, so your doctor should only prescribe them at a low dose for a short time, to help you through a crisis period.

Before prescribing you any medication, your doctor should clearly explain what it's for and explain any possible risks and benefits, so you can make an informed decision about whether or not you want to take it.

Visit **mind.org.uk/medication** for questions you could ask your doctor about medication, and information on coming off medication safely.

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How do I access treatment?

This section explains how to get professional support. It also makes suggestions for if your anxiety makes seeking treatment difficult, and what you can do if your treatment isn't working as well as you'd like.

Visit **mind.org.uk/seekinghelp** for information on talking to your doctor about any feelings or symptoms that are effecting your mental health, and taking the steps to get the support you deserve.

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> **If you don't know what is wrong with you, how do you know how to fix it? For me, actually being diagnosed with anxiety and panic disorder came as a relief! It meant that I wasn't imagining the awful symptoms I'd been experiencing.**

To get treatment on the NHS, the first step is normally to make an appointment to visit your doctor (also known as your GP). They will do an assessment, which might include asking you to fill in a questionnaire about how often you feel worried, anxious and nervous. They should then explain your treatment options to you, and you can decide together what might suit you best.

Unfortunately, NHS waiting lists for talking treatments can be very long. If you're finding this hard you could consider:

- Charities and specialist organisations. See pp.50–55 for a list of national organisations you could contact. Mind's Infoline could also help you find local services near you.

- Private therapy. Finding a private therapist is another option some people choose to explore, but it's not suitable for everyone because it usually involves paying a fee. The counselling and therapy services listed on pp.53 may be able to help you find a local service that works for you.

Self-care and coping techniques can also be really valuable to use in between sessions, or while you're on waiting lists (see pp.27–33).

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What if my anxiety stops me from seeking help?

It can be especially hard to access treatment if making or attending appointments involves doing something that makes you anxious. For example, you might not feel able to talk on the phone or leave the house.

Here are some things you could try:

- Ask your doctor if they offer home visits or telephone assessments. If not, they might be able to book you an appointment at a time when the surgery tends to be quiet.
- Some GP practices will allow someone else to ring up and book appointments for you (if you agree). It could also help to have someone come with you to the appointment for support.

Depending on what's available in your area, you may be able to refer yourself for talking treatment at a local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service, without a GP's referral (iapt.nhs.uk/services). Some IAPT services are delivered over the phone.

What if treatment doesn't help me feel better?

Your doctor should offer you regular appointments to check how you're doing, and see how well any treatment is working for you. Different things work for different people, so if a particular medication or talking treatment doesn't work for you, your doctor should offer an alternative.

If you've tried a range of treatments and none of them have helped, your doctor might refer you to a community mental health team (CMHT). This is made up of a number of different healthcare professionals, such as psychiatrists and clinical psychologists. Your CMHT can assess you separately and offer you a personalised treatment plan.

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This is particularly recommended if:

- your symptoms are making it very difficult to carry out everyday activities
- you have a serious physical health problem or another mental health problem
- you're having thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

But it's important to remember that recovery is a journey, and it won't always be straightforward. You might find it most helpful to focus on learning more about yourself and developing ways to cope, rather than trying to get rid of every symptom of your anxiety problem.

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Katie's story

I realised I struggled with anxiety and panic attacks when I was in my twenties. For years before that I'd punished myself for struggling, and for what I thought were 'weird' experiences that only I had. I'd find my mind fixating on something, like being unwell, and it would feel like a whirlwind of thoughts that I was incapable of distracting myself from.

I'd be convinced I was dying – my heart would feel like it was going to jump out of my throat, I'd feel dizzy and sick and sometimes even be sick.

It took me a long time to work out what might help with these symptoms because I didn't believe they were legitimate, I thought I was weak. However, I began to open up and talk about my experiences with my consultant, and I now have ways of coping when I find the panic rising.

In terms of practical things I do in those moments, I've found that holding onto something cold, like a can of drink, can help as it seems to reawaken my senses. And walking or standing up and moving around can help to jolt my senses back.

I've found that having a regular routine, a proper night's sleep and eating well all contribute to me feeling more grounded and in control. I also try to make sure I allow myself time to rest and unwind – having a bath or getting under the duvet and watching a film can make the world of difference when I'm feeling panicky and anxious. I've also had to learn to forgive myself, to allow myself to feel anxious and not punish myself or feel guilty. This has probably been the hardest thing.

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Another hard step was opening up to my loved ones about what was happening. Sometimes speaking to my partner helps me challenge the thoughts and worries I'm having by working through how feasible they actually are. The most helpful thing people have done for me is to be open to listening and talking about what I'm going through and not dismissing it or trying to 'cure' me.

Living with a mental health problem is exhausting. It's not just the symptoms but the feelings of guilt and embarrassment you face. No one judges the flu or a sore stomach but trying to explain you're not able to come to something because you're feeling mentally unwell can feel impossible.

Being able to talk openly about mental health means I'm able to maintain relationships with friends, even when things are tough. It can mean that I feel more able to go to work and get on with my life because I know my colleagues understand and support me. With my own hard work and the love and support of my friends and family I have been able to study, to work and most of all to have fun and be happy!

Visit **mind.org.uk/yourstories** to read more real life experiences people have shared about mental health problems.

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How can friends and family help?

It can be really difficult when someone you care about is experiencing anxiety problems or panic attacks, but there are things you can do to help. This section gives some tips and suggestions.

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Don't pressure them

Try not to put pressure on your friend or family member to do more than they feel comfortable with. It's really important to be patient, listen to their wishes and take things at a pace that feels okay for them.

It's understandable to want to help them face their fears or find practical solutions, but it can be very distressing for someone to feel they're being forced into situations before they're ready. This could even make their anxiety worse. Try to remember that being unable to control their worries is part of their mental health problem, and they aren't choosing how they feel.

Try to understand

- Find out as much as you can about anxiety. This will help you understand what they are going through.
- Ask about their experience. You could ask them how anxiety affects their day-to-day life, and what makes it better or worse. Listening to their experience could help you to empathise with how they feel.

> **What helps me is calmness, acceptance – not trying to dispel it with 'rational' or 'logical' argument.**

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Ask how you can help

Your friend or family member may already know how you can support them – for example, it might help to take them out of the situation, talk to them calmly or do breathing exercises with them, such as the exercise on p.31.

Helping someone get through a panic attack

It's understandable to feel frightened if someone you care about has a panic attack – especially if it seems to happen without warning. But it can help if you:

- try to stay calm
- gently let them know that you think they might be having a panic attack and that you are there for them
- encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply – it can help to count out loud, or ask them to watch while you gently raise your arm up and down
- encourage them to stamp their feet on the spot
- encourage them to sit somewhere quietly until they feel better.

Never encourage someone to breathe into a paper bag during a panic attack. This isn't recommended and it might not be safe.

If they already have their own coping tips, such as the ones on pp.27–33, encourage them to follow these.

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Support them to seek help

You could try the following:

- Offer to help them arrange a doctor's appointment.
- Offer support when they attend appointments. For example, you could help them plan what they'd like to talk about with the doctor, and go in with them or wait in the waiting room.
- Help them seek help from a therapist or counsellor.
- Help them research different options for support.

Look after yourself

It can sometimes be really challenging to support someone with a mental health problem – you are not alone if you feel overwhelmed at times. It is important to remember to look after your own mental health too, so you have the energy, time and distance you need to be able to help.

For example:

- Set boundaries and don't take too much on. If you become unwell yourself you won't be able to offer as much support. It is also important to decide what your limits are and how much you feel able to help.

- Share your caring role with others, if you can. It's often easier to support someone if you're not doing it alone.

- Talk to others about how you're feeling. You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you're supporting, but talking about your own feelings with someone you trust can help you feel supported too.

- Find support for yourself. The organisations listed on pp.50–55 are there to support you, too.

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Useful contacts

Every year, one in four of us will experience a mental health problem. But many of us struggle to get the right support when we need it. We at Mind believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone.

This section explains how we can help you, and provides details of many more organisations you can turn to for information and support.

> “Thanks to the web information from the Mind site I have gained more understanding than ever before of the state and place I was in. I also use Mind’s online support community for encouragement and support. It is such a loving caring place.”

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How we at Mind can help you

Helplines

Our Infoline and Legal Line provide mental health information to thousands of people across England and Wales each year. We'll listen without judgement, look into options for support near you, and help you work out your next steps. We're open 9am–6pm, Monday–Friday.

Mind Infoline
call: 0300 123 3393
text: 86463
email: info@mind.org.uk

Mind Legal Line
call: 0300 466 6463
email: legal@mind.org.uk

Online community

We know that when people use their own experiences to help each other they can feel less alone and isolated.

We run a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. However you're feeling right now, our community is a safe place to listen, share and be heard. Find out more and join in at **mind.org.uk/community**

Local Minds

Our network of local Mind branches across England and Wales provide services such as talking therapies, peer support groups and advocacy.

Call our Infoline to find out details of your nearest local Mind, or visit **mind.org.uk/localminds**, and then contact them directly to see what they offer.

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Free online resources

We publish reliable, up-to-date information on over 100 mental health topics, such as:

- mental health diagnoses
- drugs and treatments
- tips for getting and staying well
- your legal rights

Visit **mind.org.uk/info** to read or download any of our information pages for free.

Our most popular online resources are also available translated into Welsh.

Printed booklets

We produce many other booklets like this one. If you'd like to read more, we can send you up to three of these titles for free:

- Understanding mental health problems
- Understanding depression
- Seeking help for a mental health problem
- How to manage stress
- How to manage anger
- Coping with student life
- Coping with working life
- Coping when supporting someone else
- Supporting someone who feels suicidal

To order you can email publications@mind.org.uk or telephone 0844 448 4448.

Organisations wishing to order multiple copies can do so at **mind.org.uk/shop**

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More useful contacts

Advocacy and activism

Advocacy Support Cymru (ASC)
tel: 02920 540 444
web: ascymru.org.uk

Mental health advocacy services and support for people in Wales.

National Survivor User Network (NSUN)
web: nsun.org.uk

Independent network of people who have experience of mental health problems, working to change things for the better.

POhWER
tel: 03004 562 370
web: pohwer.net

Provides advocacy services across England.

Time to Change
web: time-to-change.org.uk (England)
web: timetochangewales.org.uk (Wales)

National campaigns to end stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems in England and Wales.

VoiceAbility
web: voiceability.org

Provides advocacy services across England.

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Counselling and therapy

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300
web: bacp.co.uk

Professional body for talking therapy and counselling. Provides information and a list of accredited therapists.

Counselling Directory

web: counselling-directory.org.uk

Online directory of professionally registered counsellors and psychotherapists.

Information, helplines and support

Anxiety Care UK

web: anxietycare.org.uk
Helps people to recover from anxiety disorders.

Anxiety UK

tel: 08444 775 774
web: anxietyuk.org.uk

Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

helpline: 0800 58 58 58
web: thecalmzone.net

Provides listening services, information and support for men at risk of suicide.

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More useful contacts

Carers UK
adviceline: 0808 808 7777
web: carersuk.org

Information and support for anyone who is a regular carer for another person.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)
web: nice.org.uk

Information and clinical guidelines on recommended treatments for different conditions.

NHS apps library
web: nhs.uk/apps-library

Searchable list of apps and digital health resources recommended by the NHS.

No More Panic
web: nomorepanic.co.uk

Provides information, support and advice for anyone who experiences panic disorder, anxiety, phobias or OCD.

No Panic
helpline: 08449 67 48 48
web: nopanic.org.uk

Provides a helpline, step-by-step programmes, and support for those with anxiety disorders.

PAPYRUS
HOPELineUK: 0800 068 41 41
web: papyrus-uk.org

Runs a helpline for people under 35 who are experiencing suicidal feelings.

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Reading Well

web: reading-well.org.uk

List of books endorsed by health professionals which can help manage anxiety. Available for free in local libraries.

Samaritans

24-hour helpline: 116 123 (freephone)
email: jo@samaritans.org

Chris
Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK,
PO Box 9090, Stirling FK8 2SA

web: samaritans.org

Emotional support for anyone feeling down, experiencing distress or struggling to cope.

Sane

SANEline: 0300 304 7000
web: sane.org.uk

Offers emotional support and information to anyone affected by mental health problems.

Triumph Over Phobia (TOP UK)

web: topuk.org
Provides self-help therapy groups and support for anyone who experiences OCD, phobias or related anxiety disorders.

YoungMinds

parent helpline: 0808 802 5544
web: youngminds.org.uk

Information for both parents and young people.

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