

# Anxiety-managing anxiety

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety can be a normal, health reaction. It happens to everyone in times of danger, or in worrying situations, such as exams or difficulties with relationships with parents, teachers or friends. Anxiety becomes a problem when it happens at times when there is no real danger, or when it goes on for a long time.

Anxiety affects your mind and your body. When you start to get anxious, you may suffer from different emotional symptoms, such as fear. Worry, panic, being 'uptight' or 'on edge'. Your body systems will speed up too, so you might also experience bodily sensations or symptoms like palpitations [your heart beats very fast or 'flutters'], feeling sick, chest pains, difficulty in breathing, dizziness, having 'jelly legs' sweating, or feeling faint. However, you cannot faint, as your blood pressure goes up when you panic and to faint it needs to be low.

Try not to worry about these feelings-even though they are unpleasant, they cannot harm you. There is nothing 'physically' wrong with you, even though you have physical feelings. You are not ill - it's just that anxiety can be felt in physical ways.

**Did you know...? One in 10 people see a doctor at some time because they are feeling tense, anxious or worried.**

## The Vicious Circle

Some people get anxious just by the way that they think about things. This is because the way we think affects how we feel, How we feel effects what we do or how we behave. This sets up a vicious circle of anxiety, like this:

### **Difficult Situation**

What you **think**---How you **feel**---What you **do** [actions] ---How you **feel**

Here is an example of how the vicious might work in a real life situation:

**Situation:** Get invited to a party

**Thoughts:** "If I go, go-one will talk to me. I'll just end up looking stupid".

**Feelings:** Worried, anxious, can't sleep, feel sick, tired, etc.

**Actions:** Don't go. Stay at home.

**Feelings:** Feel worse!

Try to think of a situation that has made you feel anxious or worried. On the next page, write down what that situation is in the first box.

In the second box, write down the first thought that come into your head when you think about this situation.

Next, think about the kinds of feelings you experience when you think these thoughts. They can be emotional feeling like upset, nervous, or scared, and physical feelings like feeling sick, shaky or feeling like you have butterflies in your tummy. Write these in box 3.

In the fourth box, think about ways that these feelings have caused you to behave or act, and write these down. In the example below, if you were very anxious about an exam and couldn't concentrate on studying, you might have been unable to sleep and stayed up and all night worrying.

**Situation: have to sit a difficult exam**

**Thoughts:** "It doesn't matter how hard I study- I'm going to fail"

**Feelings:** anxious, sweaty, heart beats, fast, can't sleep.

**Actions:** Can't concentrate on studying. Stay up all night worrying

**Feelings:** Exhausted! Even more anxious about falling.

## **Anxiety – Managing Anxiety**

**(5)**

If we usually see the bad side of things –“negative thinking” –this makes us more likely to worry and feel anxious. You might be thinking these negative thoughts automatically, without even realising! You can tackle these negative thoughts by learning to replace them with positive or more realistic thoughts. This takes practice, but with time you will begin to feel less anxious and more in control of your life.

In the example of the person who had to study for a difficult exam, if they had tried to think about the exam in a different way - a more positive way- they might have felt, and acted, differently:

**Situations:** Have to sit a difficult exam.

**Thoughts:** “If I study, I might pass. If I do fail, I can always get help from the teacher”.

**Feelings:** Happy that you studied. Able to get a good night’s sleep.

**Feelings:** a bit anxious, but want to study and try to pass.

**Actions:** Study for 1 hour, take a 20 minute break, study for another hour.

This time, because the person thought about the exam in a more positive (and more realistic!) way, they didn’t feel so anxious. They were then able to concentrate on studying, felt happier because they had studied, and managed to get a good night’s sleep.

Think again about the situation which caused you to be anxious. Try to think of some more positive thoughts you could have about the situation instead. Write these inside the think bubbles:

Remember that what you do, or your actions, will also affect how you feel and the way you think.

Here are some examples:

<b>What you do</b>		<b>How you feel</b>		<b>What you think</b>
Stay at home alone	→	Sad	→	I've got no friends
Go out with friends	→	Happy	→	We always have a laugh together
Go to school	→	Stressed	→	I can't keep up with my work
Have a bath	→	Relaxed	→	It's nice lying here

There are lots of different things you can do which may help you to control your anxious thoughts, and also help with the nasty physical feelings that go along with anxiety. Try out some of these suggestions and see which ones work best for you.

### **Changing your behaviour**

Sometimes when we feel anxious or worried, we may try to make ourselves feel better by:

Avoiding situations that we think will be difficult

Withdrawing from friends and social activities, and staying in where we feel safe

Stopping doing things that make us feel unpleasant

This may bring some quick relief, but over time, as you do less and less, you will probably feel worse. Doing new things needs an even bigger effort and it becomes harder to tackle any new challenges. Unpleasant feelings may come flooding back as you feel angry and disappointed with yourself.

A good way to break out of this trap is to become more active and take control. Push yourself to do things. As you become busier, you will notice a number of benefits:

**You feel better.** Becoming more active means that you have less time to notice any unpleasant feelings or listen to any negative thoughts.

**You feel more in control.** You start to regain control of your life and do the things that you want to do.

**You feel less tired.** Although it sounds silly, the more active you become, the less tired you will feel!

**You want to do more.** Once you start to become more active, you will want to do more. So, the more you do, the more you feel like doing!

**Your thinking becomes clearer.** Doing nothing makes you feel sluggish both mentally and physically. Activity sharpens up your thinking.

### **Breathing exercise**

When we are anxious we tend to over-breathe. This can cause dizziness, shaking, etc. which then makes anxiety worse. As our anxiety increases, we breathe even faster, and so the anxiety spirals out of control. Controlled breathing relaxes your body and mind, and helps overcome the unpleasant physical feelings of anxiety.

1. When you breathe, think about filling your lungs from the bottom up, so that when you breathe you should feel your stomach move.
2. Breathe in slowly to the count of 3, pushing your stomach out.
3. Hold your breath for a moment.
4. Breathe out slowly, to the count of 3, letting your stomach relax.
5. Each time you breathe out, think of the word "calm" or the word "relax".
6. To check if you are breathing properly, put your hand on your stomach, just below your ribs, with your fingertips together. If you are breathing correctly, you should feel your fingertips move apart slightly each time you breathe in.

There are other relaxation tapes and Cds can be bought from shops or on the internet, or borrowed from libraries.

### **Your relaxing place**

Some people find that they can relax their body, but that they keep thinking about worrying or upsetting things. A useful way of trying to relax your mind is to try to imagine a calming picture, or one you have created in your dreams.

Choose a quiet time when you will not be disturbed.

Shut your eyes and imagine your picture.

Really concentrate on your calming scene and imagine it in lots of detail.

Think about the colours and shapes of things.

Imagine the sounds – seagulls calling, leaves rustling, waves crashing on the sand.

Think about the smells – the smell of pine from the trees, the smell of the sea.

Try to make it feel as real as you can.

As you think of your picture, notice how calm and relaxed you have become.

This is your special calming place.

You may want to practise this. The more you practise the easier you will find it to imagine your picture and the quicker you will become calm.

There are other relaxation exercises and relaxation tapes/ CDs that can be bought from shops or on the internet or borrowed from libraries.

Whenever you feel yourself becoming stressed or anxious, you could use the breathing exercise and think of your calming picture as well.

### **Positive self-talk**

We are not always very good at praising ourselves when we do things well. POSITIVE self-talk is a way of helping us take more notice of our achievements.

Instead of thinking “I’ve only answered one question- I’ll never be able to finish all ten”, use positive self-talk such as “that’s the first question finished – now for the next one”

Instead of thinking “no-one talks to me when we go out” use positive self-talk such as “that was the first time Stephen has ever said anything to me”

Remember the more positive thoughts you wrote in the speech bubbles on page 6 Positive self-talk is useful if you are going to do something that really worries you. At these difficult times instead of listening to your doubts and worries, plan to keep repeating encouraging and positive thoughts to yourself. Positive self-talk helps you to realise that although things may not be perfect, they might not be as bad as you think.

### **Example: Amy doesn't like going out.**

Amy becomes very anxious and fearful whenever she goes out of her house. She has lots of negative thoughts about what will happen, and these make her feel very anxious.

Amy decided to try positive self-talk when she next went out. Instead of listening to her negative doubts and worries, she decided to think differently.

Before she went out she used her positive self-talk. Amy said to herself :I'm going to do this today:, "It will be all right ", "I have been out before and everything was OK", "I'm feeling relaxed, I'm in charge and I want to go out".

As Amy walked down the road, she used her positive self-talk, with comments such as "That's good, I'm halfway there", "I knew I could do it", "It's going OK" and "I know I'm going to do it". Amy kept repeating these thoughts to herself until she returned home.

After Amy arrived home she remembered to congratulate herself and thought "Well done, that wasn't so bad after all". She then treated herself to a long, relaxing bubble bath.

Can you think of any other positive thought you could use to help you to face a difficult or worrying situation?

### **Face your fears**

Breaking difficult tasks down into small steps can be helpful, but you may still put off doing them because you feel too anxious. Anxious feelings often stop us doing the things we would really like to do. However, by not doing them we then have disappointment.

- You might feel frightened about going to school, but staying at home might make you feel sad.
- You might feel scared about going out with your friends, but staying in on your own might make you feel angry with yourself.

At these times, it can be useful to face your fears and learn to overcome them. You can do this by going through the following steps:

Stage 1 : Use **Small steps** to break down your challenge into smaller tasks.

Stage 2: Think about **positive self-talk** and practice using it.

Stage3: **Relax and imagine** yourself successfully coping with your first task.

Stage 4: **Test it out**, one task at a time.

Stage 5: **Praise yourself** for being successful.

### **Examples: David is afraid to go out.**

David felt afraid to go out of the house on his own ever since he was pushed over by a gang of boys. He was feeling very unhappy about being trapped in his house but was scared about going out. He decided to **face his fears**.

- Stage 1 David decided that he would like to be able to do to the shop at the bottom of his road. By using **small steps** he identified the following tasks.
  1. To stand by his front gate for a couple of minutes
  2. To go outside the gate and then return home
  3. To go outside the gate, walk to the bus stop and then return home.
  4. To walk to the shops ( not go into them) and then return home
  5. To walk to the shops and go into them.
- Stage 2 David thought about his **positive self talk** and as he imagined himself walking to the gate he would say "I'm safe, no one will hurt me in my garden, I'm going to walk to the gate".
- Stage 3 David imagined his relaxing place. Once he **was relaxed, he imagined** a picture of himself coming out of the house and calmly walking to the front gate and then returning into his house.
- Stage 4 After imagining this a few times and practicing his positive self-talk, David felt ready to **test it out**. He decided that the best time to face his fears was during school-time when he would be less likely to meet any groups of children. He chose the time, relaxed himself, used his coping self-talk and tested his first steps.
- Stage 5 When he came in after being successful, **David praised and rewarded** himself with a mug of hot chocolate and a biscuit! He practices this step a few times before moving on to the next one.

### **Distractions**

#### **Why is distraction helpful?**

When you are worried or feel tense, it is often difficult not to think about it. But these thoughts end up making you feel worse. They keep the vicious circle of anxiety going.

- **Distraction** helps take your mind off your negative thoughts/worries.
- **Distraction** helps you control your thoughts by thinking about something else.

If you do not let yourself pay attention to your feelings of anxiety, they will eventually go away by themselves, while your attention is on something else. **Distractions** can be helpful in giving you some short-term relief from anxious feelings.



The idea of distraction is to train yourself to keep your mind busy doing what you want it to do. You teach yourself to focus your thoughts on something else. Rather than listening to worrying or negative thoughts, you can learn to drown them out by getting your mind to do what you want it to do. **Distraction** can be achieved in different ways.

Try to answer these questions

- Do you find that you feel better if you get involved in doing something, such as listening to music, playing a computer game, going for a run or talking to a friend?
- If so, what do you get involved in?

### **How can you distract yourself?**

There are lots of ways you can distract yourself. Some activities people have found useful are:-

1. **Concentrating on what is happening around you.** For example, you could listen to someone else's conversation, or count how many different red things you can see. Choose something that holds your attention. When distracting yourself, it helps to give yourself a specific task, like guessing what job people do.
2. **Mental activity.** This includes any activity you can do in your head, such as mental arithmetic, reciting the lyrics of a song or thinking puzzles. For example:

- Counting backwards from 100 in threes
- Spelling the names of your family backwards
- Naming all the albums of your favourite group

Naming the players of your favourite sports team.

The activity has to be hard enough to challenge you so don't make it too easy!

3. **Physical activity.** Apart from distracting you from your thoughts, physical activity gives you more energy and makes you feel less tired. You could play sports with friends, so jogging or just take the dog for a walk.

### **Make a list of all the things you could do to distract yourself from your worrying thoughts.**

(Reading, watching the TV or a DVD, listening to the radio or music, or phoning a friend for a chat are some things which may be helpful. Try to think of your own and include things that you enjoy. Try to include some physical and mental activities).

**At those times when you become aware that you are listening to your negative thoughts or worries, try one of the activities that you find helpful. For example:**

**Instead of lying in bed listening to your negative thoughts, put on your personal stereo and listen to some music.**

**The more you practice, the easier it will become to block out your negative thoughts.**

