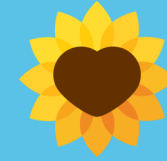




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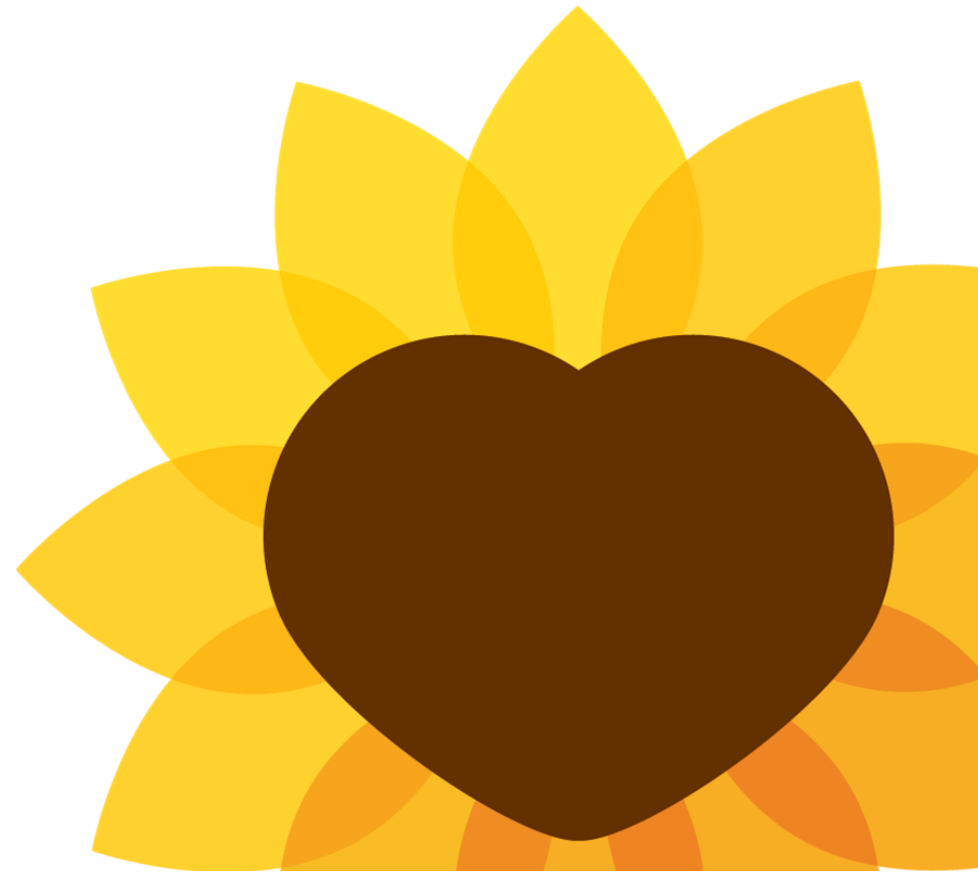
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# Anxiety

A self help guide



## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a common emotional reaction following a diagnosis of a life limiting illness. You may be experiencing some of the common signs and symptoms of anxiety. This does not necessarily mean that you have a major problem—it could be part of a normal adjustment reaction to the big changes which have happened in your life. The common signs of anxiety can be divided into four types:

- Physical sensations associated with anxiety
- Anxious thoughts
- Moods associated with anxiety
- Some of the common behavioural reactions which occur when we feel anxious.

The physical sensations which we experience as symptoms of anxiety are things like sweating, tense muscles, a pounding heart, dizziness, shortness of breath, tight chest, dry mouth, tingling and 'jelly' legs. These sensations are usually accompanied by anxious thoughts which tend to be focused on an overestimation of danger and catastrophe.

These anxious thoughts are also usually related to an underestimation of your ability to cope or to obtain any help with the difficulties. The most common moods which accompany this type of thought-pattern are anxiety, fear, panic and nervousness. When people experience these moods or have anxious thoughts, they are more likely either to avoid situations in which anxiety might occur, or leave situations when they notice any of the physical sensations associated with anxiety.

Try to think if you have been experiencing any of the common

Distraction techniques such as calming hand, visualization, reciting a poem or song or counting backwards from 1000 can be helpful.

## Anti-anxiety drugs

Most anti-anxiety drugs are prescribed only as a short-term measure eg Diazepam, because research has shown that some of them can become addictive. We also know that when someone takes certain anti-anxiety drugs for a long period of time, they need to take more and more to get the same effect. Drugs usually only take away the physical sensations - and the anxious thoughts and behaviour usually return when the drugs are stopped.

However, anti-anxiety drugs may be a useful first-aid measure for anxiety symptoms - but they are not a long-term answer to anxiety for most people.

If you are feeling very anxious, having physical, anxiety symptoms, anxious thoughts and worries most days then you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder which could benefit from specialist help. Contact your doctor who can refer you on.

## Breathing re-training

To breathe is our most natural instinct. The way we breathe - shallowly or deeply, rapidly or slowly, smoothly or abruptly - is a barometer for our physical and emotional state and one of the first indicators of whether or not we are suffering from stress. Long, smooth, exhalations can help in easing physical aches and tensions - it can seem that they are almost literally being 'blown away'.

Simple wholesome breathing techniques can help in relief of anxiety, can help relax mind and body. How well we feel is closely bound up with how well we breathe. When anxiety response is switched on, our breathing is affected and we breathe in an unbalanced way - that is, we upset the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our blood. This is one of the main reasons why people experience physical sensations such as dizziness and have a funny, tingling sensation at the end of their fingers (pallesthesia).

It is easy to get your breathing back into balance again by trying not to take large gasps of air. Instead, you can try to retrain your breathing pattern to get a balance. Start to notice your breathing pattern and whether or not it is unbalanced - if it is, you can take steps to regulate your breathing pattern. Just as unbalanced breathing was a habit, you can make a more balanced breathing pattern become a habit. To begin learning this skill, practice breathing out for the count of four (think '1,' 2,' 3,' '4' as you breathe out) and then breathe in for the count of four. Distraction techniques can help in keeping your mind occupied and focused away from worrying thoughts. You can also use distraction to cope with the physical reactions of the anxiety response.

signs and symptoms of anxiety. If you have, then it might be helpful for you to know a bit more about anxiety and where it comes from.

Anxiety is a normal human response, designed to save our lives. Our human need to respond to stress, anxiety and fear has evolved over many thousands of years, in order to help us deal with threatening situations. Our distant ancestors faced many dangers - for example, the risk of being attacked by a sabre-toothed tiger. The human body developed a response to help us escape from such dangers - you could call it a sort of 'anxiety response'. The physical effects of anxiety mentioned above are important parts of this anxiety response - they are designed to help us and to save our lives.

The 'anxiety response' or 'fight or flight response' is automatically switched on when we are in a dangerous or threatening situation. Nowadays very few of us are faced with threats like sabre-toothed tigers, but we may be exposed to other dangers and threats; if you are crossing the road and a car comes screeching round the corner, speeding towards you, your heart beats faster, your breathing becomes faster, you get a churning in your stomach and you feel hot and sweaty.

This anxiety response can save your life by helping you get out of the way. Your heart beats faster to pump the blood to your muscles so that you can move quickly away from the car. You breathe faster because your health needs more oxygen to keep it beating faster. Your muscles become very tense because you need to spring into action out of the way of the car. You have a churning sensation in your stomach because some of your blood has been directed to your legs from elsewhere in your body. Your body decides that your heart and legs need more blood for the emergency, and that your stomach can spare some of the blood which was there.

You feel hot and sweaty because of all the extra work which is going on inside you - your body tries to cool down by sweating. All of these physical sensations are happening for very important reasons. Seeing the speeding car switches on the anxiety response, which helps you to escape from the danger and threat and therefore keeps you from harm.

In this example there was a real danger and it was helpful that the anxiety response was switched on. However, the anxiety response can be switched on even if we only think something is dangerous, threatening or difficult to cope with. You might hear a bang in the middle of the night and think that there's a burglar in your house. The anxiety response is switched on even if the noise is only your cat knocking over a plant. Your thought that it was a burglar nevertheless switched on the anxiety response. Because the response is switched on, you get a pounding heart, dizziness, churning stomach and other anxiety sensations. You might get more anxious thoughts and a desire to escape.

The anxiety response is switched on when we think about danger or not being able to cope. Thoughts about danger, catastrophe and not being able to cope commonly accompany anxious moods like fear and panic, as well as anxious behaviour like escape and avoidance. The different components of the anxiety response - physical sensations, moods, thoughts and reactions - are all connected. Making changes in one of these components has a knock on effect on the other components. This means that if you can cope with anxious thoughts, then you will notice a difference in anxious moods and physical sensations. If you can cope with anxious behaviour, you will also be coping with anxious physical sensations and anxious thoughts.

Now pay special attention to the difference between the tension and the relaxation. Some people find it relaxing to say soothing words to themselves as they release the tension from their muscles - words such as 'relax', 'let go' or 'release'.

When you have done this a couple of times with your fist, you are ready to start on the main muscle groups of your body. Work through tensing and relaxing biceps, feet, thighs, chest, back, shoulders and head. The aim is to help you become aware of the difference between physical tension and relaxation. Notice the warm feelings in your fist as you do it once more. Relaxation training is like learning any new skill - it will take you a couple of weeks of regular practice before you get used to it. You will notice that it starts to work when you set aside time to do the relaxation exercises each day. Try not to do the relaxation exercises when you are sleepy, as you may fall asleep. Start to notice in your everyday life when you are physically tense (especially around your shoulders and neck). You can then use this as your cue to release the tension from your muscles using the progressive relaxation technique.

Another extremely effective way of relaxing is to make a list of activities which you find (or used to find) really relaxing - like having a bubble-bath, listening to a favourite piece of music or sitting stroking the cat. You can make sure that you do at least three of these each day - or alternatively, you can do one of these activities when you are feeling particularly tense or anxious to combat the anxiety response.

## Coping with anxiety

One of the most effective ways of coping with anxiety is to learn how to identify, evaluate and then change the anxious thoughts which are part of the anxiety response. Evaluate and change problem-thoughts which are causing negative moods like anxiety and panic. In addition to developing new ways of thinking you can learn how to change the physical reactions of the anxiety response. These methods of changing the anxiety response are called relaxation techniques. There are many different techniques to help combat anxiety responses, some of which are outlined below. Research suggests that to bring about lasting changes in anxiety problems there have to be real and fundamental changes in thinking patterns. However, some of these techniques may be helpful in the short term.

## Progressive muscle relaxation

One of the common relaxation techniques is called progressive muscle relaxation, which involves learning to relax all the major muscle-groups in your body. This combats the anxiety response because muscle tension is a common physical sensation when we get anxious. This technique consists of learning how to tense and then relax the muscles of your body. You can start to learn how this works by clenching one of your fists and holding it for about five seconds (don't clench it too tightly - you don't want the tension to become too painful). Then stop clenching and let all the tension go - relax your hand.

## Anxiety response

The four main components of the anxiety response are:

Moods	Anxiety, fear, panic
Thoughts	'I can't cope with this' 'What if I never get better?' 'What if it all goes wrong?' 'I'm going to collapse'
Physical sensations	Dry mouth, dizziness, chest pain, shortness of breath, sweating, palpitations
Behaviour	Trying to escape, avoiding things

Worry and anxiety tends to concentrate on pointless wishing that we could change the past or dwelling on unavoidable aspects of the future.

## Panic attacks

Panic is an extreme form of anxiety. Panic attacks are characterized by a period of intense fear, anxiety or discomfort. During a panic attack physical sensations develop and build up to reach a peak. These sensations are usually palpitations, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, feelings of choking, chest-pain, nausea, dizziness, feelings of unreality, tingling sensations and hot flushes.

During a panic attack there is usually a feeling of impending doom (thinking that something awful is about to happen) and thoughts regarding personal catastrophe, such as 'I'm going to die', 'I'm having a heart attack' or 'I'm losing my mind'. These catastrophic thoughts about the normal sensations associated with anxiety and stress make things worse - you get anxious about feeling anxious. In other words, you get a tight chest because you are uptight. You then think that the tight chest means you are having a heart attack - and this makes you feel even more anxious, which makes your chest tighten up even more.

You also experience even more physical sensations, such as shortness of breath and dizziness and become convinced that your theory that you are having a heart attack is correct. This culminates in a panic attack. Panic attacks are triggered by normal physical sensations associated with being anxious. They can also be triggered by normal sensations associated with being tired or feeling unwell - or by anxious / negative thoughts.

