

Anxiety-

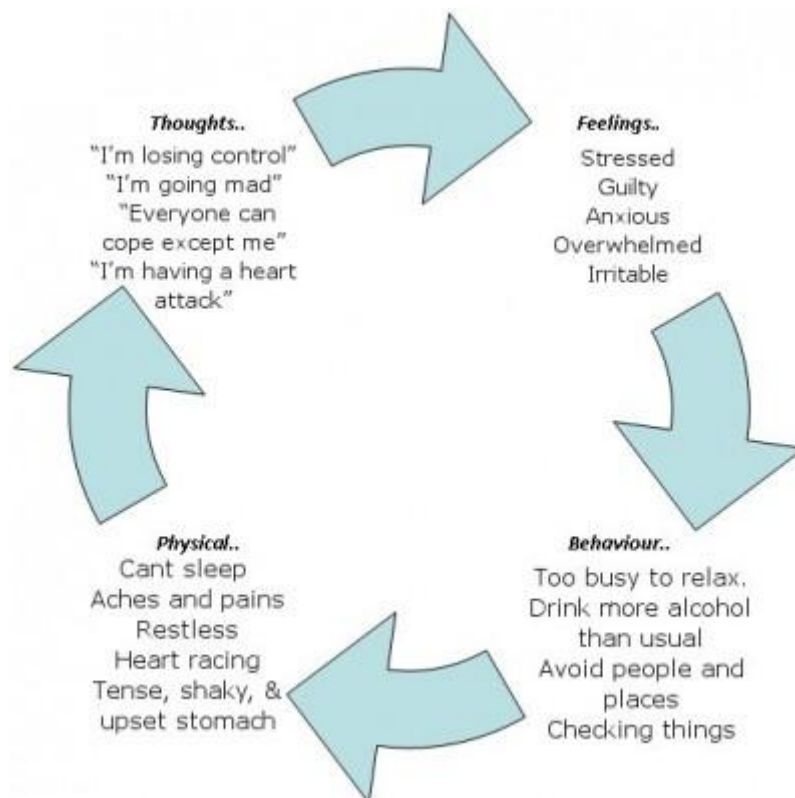
Information and a self-help guide

Anxiety

Anxiety can be a very normal and healthy response to stressful situations, such as paying bills or sitting an exam. However, it becomes a problem when a person feels overwhelmed and it stops them doing what they want to do.

Typical symptoms of excessive anxiety can include feeling restless and irritable, with disrupted sleep and concentration. All of this can be exhausting and very distressing.

The cycle of anxiety



Common Symptoms Of Anxiety

What happens to someone experiencing anxiety?

Anxiety can be very physical and affects the body through a primitive survival mechanism often called 'fight or flight'. This response is triggered when we sense any kind of threat, it causes a reaction which is supposed to help us cope with danger.

Unfortunately in the modern age this ability to 'fight' or 'flight' i.e. run-away isn't useful for the things that make us feel stressed today, such as a meeting at work or walking through a busy town centre. It can actually make us feel worse.

Common ways we think

Worry is what we do when we think about possible negative situations. Usually these are future situations and worry can help us problem solve.

However, in anxiety the worry can become excessive and so feeds into the problem, which can actually prevent us taking positive action or problem solving.

We also become hyper-vigilant, or very aware of possible danger, so we scan our surroundings or look forward trying to find things that might go wrong.

For example, 'what if...

- I'm late tomorrow
- I lose my job
- I can't pay the bills".

These worries tend to be about anything and everything and become difficult to ignore or control.

Common ways we feel

- Stressed
- Overwhelmed
- Irritable
- Sad or low.

Common ways it affects the body

- Dizziness
- Drowsiness and tiredness
- Pins and needles
- Irregular heartbeat (palpitations)
- Muscle aches and tension
- Dry mouth
- Excessive sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Stomach ache
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Headache
- Excessive thirst
- Frequent urinating
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.

Common things we do

- Pace up and down
- Start lots of jobs but don't finish any
- Difficulty relaxing
- Become more fidgety than usual
- Avoid people
- Avoid certain places such as town centre or busy supermarkets
- Drink more alcohol or smoking more than usual
- Talk or move quicker than usual
- Use 'safety behaviours' – please see safety behaviours information sheet

Overcoming Your Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural emotion which we can't get rid of altogether, but simply learn to manage when it becomes too much.

The aim here is to become our own therapist. That way whenever we experience problems with anxiety, now or in the future, we have a toolbox of techniques to help us manage our situation. Now we're going to break down how to tackle this into small, manageable steps.

Step 1 – learn about anxiety

Before we fight our fears, we need to understand what is happening and how it affects us personally. It might be useful to draw your own [vicious cycle](#) of anxiety to really get to know what you're dealing with.

- You can learn about what happens to our bodies during stress or anxiety with the [fight or flight](#) handout
- Following this, please read our handout on [safety behaviours](#) which will help you understand what keeps anxiety going.

Step 2 – relaxation

- Breathing techniques
 - Progressive muscle relaxation
 - Exercise.
-

Step 3 – challenge your thoughts

Thoughts play a big part in anxiety. Sometimes our thoughts are not based on facts, but are affected by how we are feeling. Please see the example below to see how different thoughts can make us feel better or worse:

John is...	The situation	Thoughts	By the time he gets to work...
Anxious: not sleeping well, worried about work, feeling tense all the time.	John was slightly late getting up on Monday morning and has had to catch the later bus so will be about twenty minutes late for work!	"I can't do anything right, I'm just no good. The boss will be angry and I will probably end up fired! If I can't pay the mortgage I'll lose my house."	John is feeling even more tense; he has increased heart rate and is over-breathing. He is already distracted with worries about being late, finding it hard to concentrate on work, and now he also feels physically unwell because of over-breathing.
Happy: has just had a nice relaxing weekend and is looking forward to the new project he is working on at work.		"Oh well everyone has a bad day once in a while and it's only twenty minutes. I am usually on time. As long as I get my work done the boss might not be angry, if he even notices I'm late at all, and I could always stay later to make up the time."	John arrives at work feeling slightly anxious from rushing but keen to get on with work. He is thinking clearly and feels good so starts working straight away.

Unhelpful thinking styles

Based on Beck's 'thinking errors'.

- There are more modern versions which are more user friendly
- Is it based on fact? – Drawing conclusions that are not based on evidence
- Negative filter? – Ignoring some aspects of a situation, usually only focussing on the negative
- Generalising – making a generalising statement (i.e. which covers all or many different situations) based on a single event
- Minimising or magnifying – for example, minimising positive events or evidence which doesn't agree with your thought and magnifying negative events
- Personalising – taking responsibility for things or relating them to yourself when there is no reason to
- Black and white thinking – thinking in all or nothing terms, for example, 'if I can't get 100% in this test I'm a complete failure'.

Thought balancing techniques

This is a way of 'balancing out' unhelpful thoughts by seeing how true they really are.

Often when we are feeling stressed our thoughts tend to be more worried and negative, they are not always based on real life. As John's example shows, when we are already feeling bad we tend to interpret things in a negative way.

For example, 'catastrophising' or thinking of the worst possible outcome, which is what John did when he thought he might lose his job and his house because he was late to work. You can try the Thought Balancing sheet with your own example!

What is the thought?

'I will lose my job and my house because I am late!'

How do I feel about this?

'Stressed, sad, and very anxious.'

What is the evidence for this thought?

'I am supposed to be at work for 9am, therefore the boss will not like it if I come in late – it makes me look unreliable, or like I don't care about my job.'

What is the evidence against this?

'I am never usually late. I have seen other people come in late and they have never lost their job. Its only twenty minutes, if I get in trouble at all it will probably just be a warning. I will still be able to get my work done and I am good at my job.'

What would be a more realistic thought?

'The boss might not be happy I am late but I will make sure I do my work. I am not likely to lose my job over something so small.'

How do I feel now?

'Much calmer. I'm not happy about being late but I don't think it will have any severe consequences. I will just make sure it doesn't happen again and I bet nobody will even remember this by next week.'