

Anxiety

Contents

[About anxiety](#)

[Symptoms of anxiety](#)

[Identifying the trigger for your anxiety](#)

[Coping with anxiety](#)

[Useful links](#)

About anxiety

Anxiety and worry are very fundamental human emotions that we will all feel at times. Some people suggest that we only notice them when they occur in excess. Many people adapt to very high levels of anxiety and do not consider it a problem until they meet people who are less worried.

Anxiety has a very healthy purpose. If we did not feel anxious about certain situations then we would risk falling over cliffs, stepping into fires and so on. Similarly, if we had no anxiety about ourselves in relation to others we might well behave with great insensitivity.

Sometimes anxiety can become excessive and unhealthy. In what follows we shall endeavour to identify levels of anxiety and worry which are suitable for remedy and to give some ideas about responding to them. However, we do this bearing in mind that anxiety is a necessary feature of living.

Symptoms of anxiety

Here are some of the symptoms of anxiety. You may experience only one of these or you may have several:

Physical Signs

Racing heart, dry mouth, increased rates of breathing, increased sweating, disturbances of bladder and bowel functions, trembling, disturbed sleep.

Sensations

Tense muscles lead to increased fidgeting, prickling sensations in the skin and stiffness in the joints. There may be unpleasant sensations in the solar plexus region, headaches and aching elsewhere in the body.

Imagery

When we are anxious our mind often produces sharp flashes of imagination (e.g. of us in a feared situation such as an exam) with pessimistic overtones. These can be very vivid and disturbing.

Thoughts

Anxiety tends to increase the amount of thinking we do in the area of concern. Usually the thoughts are selective - isolating and magnifying the worst aspects of the feared situation. It gets hard to think straight and there may be overriding thoughts of wanting to escape.

Relations with others

Two opposing tendencies may be experienced here. The anxious person can isolate themselves and withdraw from people. Alternatively, there can be increased dependence upon others - such as asking repetitive questions, looking for reassurance, or just needing to be in the presence of others to bring about calm.

Activities

We either become more frenetic and overactive or else more commonly, we avoid the source of the worry entirely - sometimes even to the extent of not even allowing ourselves to think or imagine the worry. For example, a person who is worried about speaking in a tutorial may decide not only to not do this, but also avoid imagining doing it and may even hide all the lecture notes associated with the subject of the tutorial.

Feelings

Hard to capture in words but usually described as uncomfortable, unhappy, tense, pressured feelings with a keen edge to them. Such feelings interfere with everyday activity and take away the fun in life.

Identifying the trigger for your anxiety

Identifying symptoms of anxiety is one step, but another feature of higher levels of anxiety is that it doesn't always affect us uniformly. Quite often there are just one or two situations which bring it out. The anxiety can be experienced by just imagining the situation. There is often nothing so powerful in triggering anxiety as picturing yourself in some feared situation or state, even if in reality you are unlikely to be within a million miles of it actually happening. Finally, anxiety takes different forms and expressions.

These forms include:

- General Anxiety (being anxious about many aspects of your life).
- Worry (continually thinking over a problem beyond what is needed to produce a solution).
- Specific Anxiety (anxiety over a certain situation - e.g. exams; social situations etc.).
- Phobia (an excessive fear of a particular situation or item leading to avoidance).
- Hypochondria (an anxiety about suffering illness).
- Panic attacks (a sudden uncontrollable triggering of physical anxiety symptoms).

Coping with anxiety

- Take an interest in exactly how your anxiety manifests itself. Modern thought would suggest that we might gain from being informed and monitoring ourselves.
- Talk about your worry to a counsellor so you can become more objective about it and begin to understand any paradoxes. The University Counsellors have a lot of experience in this.
- Take a measure of how you react in different situations and review the ingredients which are particularly worrying.
- Look at the situations you are avoiding because of anxiety and begin to consider how you could begin to expose yourselves to these in small but increasing steps.
- Seek to learn more about your anxiety. Reading may be a tool to help in this.
- Develop a problem-solving attitude to allow you to dismantle the large problems into lots of smaller ones and then to resolve them by practical steps. For example small steps to deal with a large anxiety over public speaking could include talking to a counsellor; observing how others cope; making your tutor aware of the problem you have; preparing the subject; rehearsing in private; taping your voice; practising before a friend; getting as relaxed as possible on the day; doing it.
- Explore general stress management and relaxation - they will also make you generally happier and so more able to deal with the things you find difficult, which can be very beneficial in giving you a tool to help control panic attacks and reduce overall anxiety levels. You will need to make an appointment to see a counsellor or come to one of the workshops on stress reduction for exams. Other ways of learning these kinds of breathing skills would be to find a meditation group, yoga class or certain types of 'martial arts' such as tai chi. Knowing you can control panic attacks gives you more confidence in general.
- Medication can be very useful for some people when they are coping with specific crises or when anxiety needs an initial reduction to allow for planned action to be taken. Be very wary of using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to overcome anxiety as they rarely offer more than a fleeting solution.

In summary the suggested approach is to talk it through to reduce the fears, to explore active problem solving and to learn how to control the physical symptoms through [breathing exercises](#)

Useful links

[Anxiety UK](#)

[Anxiety Care UK](#)

[4-7-8 Breathing tutorial](#)

[Mind – Anxiety and panic attacks](#)

[Mind – Useful contacts](#)

[NHS](#) – Self-help resources

[Samaritans](#)

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team: 01509 228338

studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).

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