

Managing Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

Feeling anxious is a totally normal response to feelings of fear and stressful situations; it does not mean that you are 'weak' or 'crazy'. Actually the response dates back to our evolutionary survival mechanisms of 'fight, flight, freeze', which is triggered by the stress hormones Adrenaline and Cortisol. This was very helpful at a time when we might have had to run away from a hungry bear; unfortunately our brains are unable to differentiate between that and a modern day stress e.g. delivering a presentation.

Anxiety may be experienced at many levels, from a low level worry or nervousness to severe panic, dependent on a person's particular circumstances and/or physical and emotional health.

Healthy levels of stress can help us to perform to the best of our ability, making us feel more alert and motivated.

Too much stress/anxiety however, can hinder our ability to cope with everyday life and may lead to:

- Physical symptoms (e.g. shortness of breath, trembling, heart racing, stomach churning)
- Negative thoughts (e.g. 'I'm going to fail/everyone's watching/I'm having a heart attack')
- Unhelpful behaviour (e.g. avoiding people, procrastination around work, drinking alcohol/taking drugs, poor eating habits and lack of sleep).

Usually acute anxiety is relatively short lived and, with helpful strategies, can dissipate in time.

How can I help myself?

Try to identify the causes of stress in your life and find practical ways to reduce them, as soon as you begin to feel some difficulty - some situations can be solved more easily at the early stages. For example: make an appointment to speak to your personal tutor/supervisor about any academic problems you might have; calmly discuss a relationship problem; be realistic about how many commitments you can take on and say 'no' to things that seem too much.

Look after yourself - eat healthily, take light exercise and maintain a regular sleeping pattern. Spend time with supportive friends and family. Do things you enjoy - hobbies and socialising provide balance.

Challenge negative thoughts

You are probably more able to deal with situations than you give yourself credit for. Anxiety and panic confuse our thought processes. Try to picture yourself as an outsider looking in on your situation, if it was someone else going through this, what would you do/suggest to help them? The following are some common negative thoughts that require challenging:

- All or nothing thinking - when you think that the situation is a catastrophe and are not taking into account the grey areas or the fact that these feelings will pass one day.
- Being hard on yourself - no one is perfect and no one expects perfectionism from you. Try to be satisfied with doing your best, and be realistic about what that means. Set achievable targets and reward yourself, focus on your successes.
- Comparing yourself - judging yourself against others is a recipe for unhappiness. You don't know how others are feeling or doing, remember the gliding, elegant swan is paddling frantically beneath the surface of the water. Try to accept/be comfortable with yourself and how you do things.
- 'What if-ing' - do you find your thoughts spiralling into negativity until your predictions become quite irrational? Try to stop thinking about things that may never happen or

exaggerating the negative consequences of events. Literally say, “Stop” to yourself, take a few deep breaths and bring yourself back to the present moment. Your job is to focus on the things you can control, the other stuff will fall into place or you will cross that bridge when you come to it, with any support available.

Helpful strategies

Calm yourself: try some relaxation and breathing techniques, this will calm down the activity of adrenaline and relax the physical effects of anxiety, restoring your ability to think more rationally.

Distraction: focus on something totally unrelated, phone a friend or do a crossword, this will combat unwanted thoughts and then you can get back to the problem at hand with a clearer mind. (N.B. this is not the same as procrastination or avoidance).

Confront the situation: attempt to remain in the situation and use relaxation techniques; it is likely that the anxious feelings will subside in time. In this way you will prove to yourself that you are able to deal with these circumstances effectively and that anxiety is not dangerous and does reduce. You will be able to use this ‘evidence’ to support you face other fears in the future.

Further help and support

If you find your anxiety prolonged and symptoms severe or difficult to control, despite trying out these strategies, please seek help:

- Speak to your GP, a trusted friend, family member, tutor or supervisor.
- Contact the university counselling service on: 0118 378 4216 or email: counselling@reading.ac.uk
- Helpful websites include: http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=46 (this provides information and modules to work through to help with excessive worrying). http://www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/anxiety (more helpful information)
- One of many useful publications is: ‘Overcoming Anxiety’ by Helen Kennerley.
- Try out the relaxation CD, available for £2 from the Counselling Department.

Relaxation Techniques

Breathing exercise:

Try ‘7/11’ breathing – breathe in slowly for a count of 7, imagine filling your stomach first and then your chest. Hold the breath for as long as it’s comfortable. Breathe out slowly for a count of 11. Repeat until panicky feelings subside.

Tense and Relax

This can help with getting to sleep; some people find difficulty with sleeping when they are anxious.

Try the following exercise: Lie down and focus on each part of your body, tense and relax each one in turn, start with your toes, the top of your feet, your heels, ankles etc. Work your way through and really feel every part relaxing separately.

Emergency Stop Technique

Try this as a quick fix if you get anxious during the exam:

- Say sharply to yourself “STOP”.
- Breathe in and hold your breath for a moment before slowly breathing out. As you do so relax your shoulders and hands.
- Pause, then breathe in slowly again and hold. As you breathe out relax your forehead and jaw.
- Stay quiet for a few moments; notice your breathing, then go on with what you were doing, moving slowly and smoothly.