

WELLBEING GUIDE

to reducing anxiety



Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Most people experience stress or anxiety at some point in their lives.

Stress is usually a response to something external such as a clustering of deadlines, an over-scheduled day or an argument with a friend. This feeling will usually reduce or disappear once the situation has resolved.

Anxiety is often described as a feeling of dread or apprehension of daily life situations where there is no real threat. You might feel anxious before an exam or deadline and a little anxiety can be helpful for performance, and can be normal. But it can cause us to have a disproportionate reaction which can continue even if the system resolves.

Effects of anxiety

A small amount of anxiety can be helpful in managing a stressful situation. If anxiety appears frequently or at times when there is no clear reason, it may be time to explore what is happening. When we perceive a threat our brains react to keep us safe. This response triggers a release of chemicals into our body which can cause a variety of physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, racing heart, stomach churning and/or changes to how we physically see and hear things. Non-physical symptoms might be negative thoughts such as 'I'm going to fail', and/or 'everyone's watching me'.

Anxiety symptoms can lead to unhelpful behaviours such as: avoiding people, procrastination around work, increased alcohol/drug use, poor eating habits and unbalanced sleep.

We have two systems that manage our responses to threat:

- ✓ **THE SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM** – known for responding to dangerous and stressful situations, this functions like an accelerator pedal in a car triggering fight or flight response. This provides the body with a burst of energy so that it can respond to perceived dangers.
- ✓ **THE PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM** – functions like a brake. It promotes the 'rest and digest' response that calms down the body after the danger has passed.

Helpful strategies in the moment

Try breathing techniques to trigger your 'rest and digest' response. This will signal to your brain that there is no real danger and help reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety allowing you to think more rationally. A suggested technique is breathing out longer than you breath in.

Refocus on something totally unrelated; call a friend or go for a walk. This will help combat unwanted thoughts and then you can get back to the problem at hand with a clearer mind (this approach is not the same as procrastination or avoidance).

Challenge negative thoughts

Anxiety and panic can confuse our thought processes. Try to picture yourself as an outsider looking in on your situation, if it were someone else going through this, what would you do/suggest to help them? The following are some common negative thoughts that require challenging:

- ✓ **BLACK AND WHITE THINKING** – when you think that the situation is a catastrophe and are not considering the grey areas and that feelings are temporary.
- ✓ **BEING HARD ON YOURSELF** – no one is perfect, and no one expects perfection from you. Perfectionism is impossible. Do your best and be realistic about what that means. Set achievable targets and reward yourself, focus on your successes.

Tell yourself to stop then take a few deep breaths and bring yourself back to the present moment.

Ways of managing your anxiety over time

- ✓ **LEARN** – the more we know about anxiety the easier it becomes to manage it. Try podcasts, online support groups and literature.
- ✓ **SLEEP** – creating a healthy sleep routine can help reduce anxiety and dreaming can help us process the day's events and in turn some of the effects of our anxiety.
- ✓ **EXERCISE** – reduces the amount of stress hormones in your body which build up when your body goes into 'flight or fight' response.
- ✓ **DIET** – too much sugar, caffeine, and alcohol can cause or increase anxiety. A healthy balanced diet is key to managing symptoms.
- ✓ **POSITIVE THINKING** – challenge negative thinking by repeating positive thoughts. Anxiety cannot take hold when you are in a positive state of mind.

- ✓ **VISUALISATION** – instead of focusing on failure, visualise success. Our primitive brain doesn't know the difference between imaginary thoughts and real ones so give yourself a break and try imagining the best instead of the worst!
- ✓ **RELAX** – try breathing techniques, guided meditation, mindfulness and engaging with hobbies you enjoy. Try not to criticise yourself for being in stressful situations. Remember positive changes take time.

- ✓ **CONFRONT THE SITUATION** if and when you are comfortable enough to do so, 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 in facing other fears in the future.

The key here is balance.
Don't let things escalate and suffer with anxiety alone.

Use this space to write what techniques you going to try to help reduce anxiety?

A large white rounded rectangular box with a soft drop shadow, intended for the user to write their response to the prompt above. The box is empty and occupies the lower half of the page.

Further help and support

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

- **Speak to your GP, a trusted friend, family member, tutor, or supervisor**
- **Register for the University Counselling and Wellbeing Service**
 - reading.ac.uk/essentials/support-and-wellbeing/counselling-and-wellbeing
- **Anxiety UK**
 - The national charity for people with anxiety has an excellent website with lots of useful information and a helpline. Student membership gets you access to multiple resources.
 - anxietyuk.org.uk
- **The Sleep Charity**
 - The Sleep Charity has a helpline and a website with brilliant information on sleep hygiene.
 - thesleepcharity.org.uk
- **Frank**
 - Honest information about drugs. If you find yourself misusing substances to cope with how you feel then talk to Frank.
 - talktofrank.com
- **The Chaplaincy Centre: reading.ac.uk/chaplaincy**
 - They run free mindfulness courses throughout the academic year. This is an evidence based therapeutic technique that can help with stress and anxiety.
- **For breathing exercises to help reduce anxiety**
 - nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress