



# What is Anxiety and Stress?

# Anxiety and stress

## About this leaflet

- This leaflet will help you understand what Anxiety and Stress is
- It will help you identify symptoms of Anxiety and Stress
- Provide you with strategies for breaking the cycle of Anxiety and Stress
- Provide you with relaxation exercises to manage Anxiety and Stress

## What is Anxiety and stress?

Anxiety is a normal reaction that we all experience at one point or another. Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety from time to time and these can be triggered by situations or events that we encounter. Anxiety is a natural response that we all have as humans which triggers a 'fight' or 'flight' response to warn us of danger.

A certain amount of anxiety can be helpful, as it can motivate us to prepare for situations or can prompt us to make positive changes. Examples of when some anxiety can be a good thing is situations such as preparing for an exam or in competitive sports. That little bit of anxiety can drive us to prepare and enhance our performance.

Anxiety can be a problem when it becomes overwhelming to the point that we perceive threat to be severe and unmanageable. This perception then undermines our ability to cope, which can lead to overwhelming feelings and symptoms of stress.

## Triggers

There is not one single cause of anxiety. Some people experience anxiety which stems from having an anxious personality or a disposition to worry. Some anxiety can stem from early experiences also. Some people can experience anxiety following significant life events. Some people experience anxiety which is triggered by stressful situations such as work or financial pressures.

## Cycle of Avoidance

Overwhelming anxiety is prolonged as part of a cycle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. When we experience the cycle of anxiety, we develop heightened feelings of worry about a potential threat that we think will be negative. We search our environment and assess situations for warning signs of danger. We often predict the worst outcome.

Below are some of the symptoms that we might notice when we are feeling Anxious:

## Thoughts

When we experience anxiety, there are often negative thoughts or worries that trigger how we feel. The negative thoughts can often be about ourselves or about situations. Below are examples of thoughts that we might experience when we are anxious.

- 'I'm worried people will judge me'
- 'People will look at me'
- 'I am going to panic'
- 'I have a lot on my plate, and I can't cope'
- 'I'm worried that something bad will happen'
- 'I'm crumbling under pressure'

- 'I will lose my job'
- 'I will fall into debt'
- 'I will be blamed'

### Emotions

Emotions are what we usually notice first when we feel anxious, these can be a range of emotions. The emotions are often linked to the thoughts that we experience. They can also be linked to how we feel physically as well as what we do on a behavioural level. Below is an example of emotions that we experience when we are anxious:

- 'Worried'
- 'Fearful'
- 'Scared'
- 'Uncertain'
- 'Panicky'
- 'Afraid'
- 'Irritability'

### Physical

When we are anxious there are physical symptoms that often accompany the anxiety that we feel. These feelings are normal; however, we can often worry that something is wrong with us or that something bad will happen, this in turn intensifies the feelings of anxiety. It is important to remember that usually the worst that we predict will happen often does not actually happen. Below are some of the feelings that we experience:

- 'Sweating'
- 'Feeling flushed'
- 'Butterflies in stomach'
- 'Shakiness'
- 'Disrupted sleep or oversleeping'
- 'Problems with appetite'
- 'Poor concentration'
- 'Restlessness'

### Behavioural

When we fall into a cycle of anxiety, we can start to use avoidance strategies and other unhelpful behaviours to cope with the anxiety. Avoidance is often unhelpful and can feed into the cycle of anxiety. Below are examples of avoidance strategies and unhelpful behaviours we start to adopt:

- 'Avoid going to the supermarket'
- 'Procrastination'
- 'Using alcohol or other substances to cope'
- 'Avoiding friends and family'
- 'Reaching out for snacks to cope'
- 'Avoiding meetings'
- 'Snapping at others'

## Your cycle

It's important for us to recognise our triggers of anxiety to start working towards breaking the cycle. As mentioned in the earlier section, triggers can be a range of factors including worries, early life situations, stressful experiences, and significant life changes. Recognising the triggers of anxiety is the first step towards breaking the cycle. Use the space below to write down the **triggers** of your anxiety

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It is also important to recognise what worry thoughts you experience when you are feeling anxious. As highlighted earlier, the thoughts that we have are all linked to how we feel emotionally, therefore it is important to capture those thoughts that trigger our anxiety. Use the space below to write down the **thoughts** that you experience

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As mentioned in the previous section, **emotions** are what we usually notice first when we experience anxiety. These emotions have a strong link with our thoughts and our behaviours. What emotions do you usually notice when you feel anxious? Please use the space below to write them down

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We also notice physical symptoms are also linked to our thoughts. The physical symptoms that we experience can make us start to worry or interpret the situation to be worse than what it is. This often exacerbates the anxiety. Use the space below to write down your **physical** symptoms

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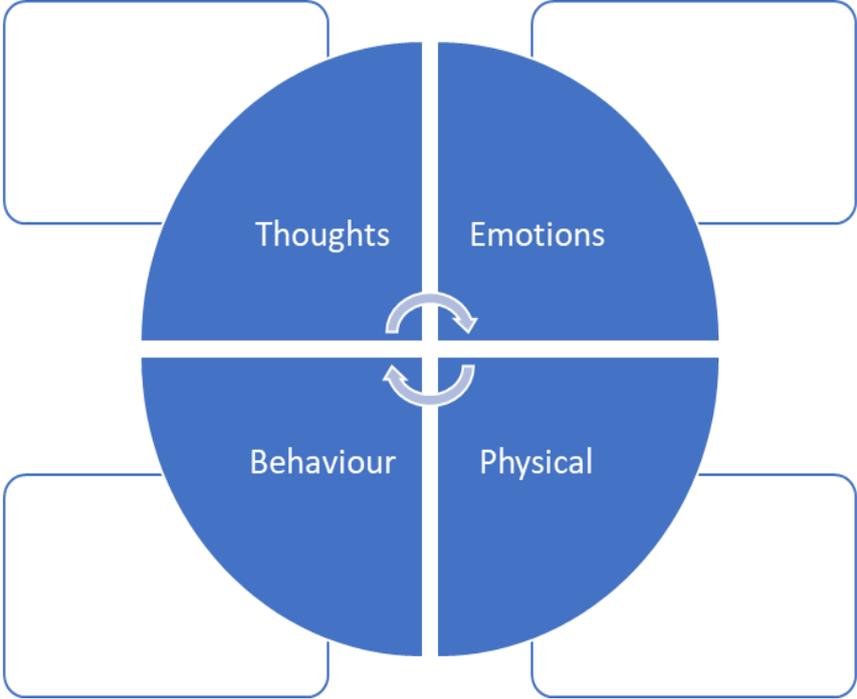
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In the earlier section we also covered how when we are anxious, we can start to develop unhelpful coping strategies which manifest as unhealthy behaviours such as avoidance strategies and other unhelpful behaviours to cope. Use the space below to write down the type of behaviours that you engage in

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Try plotting your cycle in the figure below. Notice how all these areas are linked with each other?



## Breaking the cycle through positive change

Now we have learnt how to recognise the cycle, we can talk about breaking the cycle of anxiety. There are helpful strategies which we can adopt in a two-step process in order to start breaking the cycle.

### Step 1 – Anxiety diary

Capture your anxiety emotions and behaviours using a diary. Using an anxiety diary can help us start to develop a picture of the type of anxiety that we experience and can help us identify any unhealthy coping strategies. It can help us to identify any patterns of anxiety, for example, are there particular times when we might experience anxiety more than others? Are there certain emotions that we experience more than others? What do (behaviour) you do when you feel anxious?

Below is a template to make use of which can start to help you capture the anxiety that you feel. Remember that our emotions are usually what we notice first when we are starting to get anxious. Notice what you do in that moment.

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Anxiety Emotion (Rate 0-100%) e.g. fear, worry, uncertainty, tension</b>	<b>Unhealthy Behaviours</b>
<b>Example:</b> Overwhelmed with tasks relating to project	Tense	Procrastinating and finding unhealthy activities to distract self, including scrolling on social media.  Reaching out for junk food.

Reflection: What did you learn from doing the anxiety diary? Was there an unhealthy behaviour pattern in what you do? Remember unhealthy behaviours can include reaching out for unhealthy snacks, snapping at others, procrastinating, and using illicit substances to cope. Was there any avoidance? Avoidance can also be an unhealthy behaviour, because when we start avoiding.

## Step 2 – Time for positive change

So, you have identified unhealthy patterns of behaviour, now it's time to turn it around. Use the diary below to identify healthier activities:

Situation	Anxiety Emotion (Rate 0-100%) e.g. fear, worry, uncertainty, tension	Healthy Behaviours
<b>Example:</b> Overwhelmed with tasks relating project	Tense	<p><b>Prioritise.</b> Find a notebook to write down and list everything on your plate. What is the highest priority on the list?</p> <p>Can you make a start on that task? Break down the task into small parts. If you are uncertain or need support, seek some help from your managers or your colleagues to try and understand the task.</p> <p><b>Delegate.</b> Can you delegate some of your workload?</p>

## Try progressive muscle relaxation

Relaxation is a skill that slows down the body's response to feelings of stress, worry or anxiety. It can help to counteract the fight or flight response when it is no longer needed and helps us to calm down mentally too. Progressive muscle relaxation helps relax your mind and body by progressively tensing and relaxation muscle groups throughout your entire body.

It can help by:

- **Reducing tiredness-** if you can manage everyday life without tension
- **Improve performance-** Your performance in work, sport or music can be improved through self-awareness and control of tension
- **Reducing pain-** Pain can occur as a result of tension (e.g. headaches, backache, muscle pain) therefore reducing tension can help alleviate pain

- **Coping with stress and anxiety-** Relaxation helps you to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety
- **Improving sleep-** By allowing yourself to feel calmer
- **Improving self-confidence-** By improving self-awareness and ability to cope with everyday life

### How to practice:

You will tense each muscle group vigorously, but without straining, and then suddenly release the tension and feel the muscle relax. You will tense each muscle for about 5 seconds. If you have any pain or discomfort at any of the targeted muscle groups, feel free to omit that step. Throughout this exercise you may visualize the muscles tensing and a wave of relaxation flowing over them as you release that tension. It is important that you keep breathing throughout the exercise.

Begin by finding a comfortable position either sitting or lying down in a location where you will not be interrupted.

Allow your attention to focus only on your body. If you notice your mind wandering, bring it back to the muscle you are working on.

Take a deep breath through your abdomen, hold for a few second, and exhale slowly. Again, as you breathe notice your stomach rising and your lungs filling with air.

As you exhale, imagine the tension in your body being released and flowing out of your body. And again inhale and exhale. Feel your body already relaxing. As you go through each step, remember to keep breathing

#### **FACE**

Tighten the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as high as you can. Hold for about five seconds. And abruptly release feeling that tension fall away. Pause for about 10 seconds. Now smile widely, feeling your mouth and cheeks tense. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release, appreciating the softness in your face. Pause for about 10 seconds. Next, tighten your eye muscles by squinting your eyelids tightly shut. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

#### **NECK**

Gently pull your head back as if to look at the ceiling. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release, feeling the tension melting away. Pause for about 10 seconds. Now feel the weight of your relaxed head and neck sink. Breath in...and out. In...and out. Let go of all the stress. In...and out.

#### **HANDS**

Now, tightly, but without straining, clench your fists and hold this position for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

## **ARMS**

Now, flex your biceps. Feel that build-up of tension. You may even visualize that muscle tightening. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release, enjoying that feeling of limpness. Breathe in...and out. Now tighten your triceps by extending your arms out and locking your elbows. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

## **SHOULDERS**

Now lift your shoulders up as if they could touch your ears. Hold for about 5 seconds, and quickly release, feeling their heaviness. Pause for about 10 seconds. Tense your upper back by pulling your shoulders back trying to make your shoulder blades touch. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

## **STOMACH**

Tighten your chest by taking a deep breath in, hold for about 5 seconds, and exhale, blowing out all the tension. Now tighten the muscles in your stomach by sucking in. Hold for about 5 seconds, and release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

## **LEGS**

Tighten your thighs by pressing your knees together, as if you were holding a penny between them. Hold for about 5 seconds...and release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

## **FEET**

Now flex your feet, pulling your toes towards you and feeling the tension in your calves. Hold for about 5 seconds, and relax, feel the weight of your legs sinking down. Pause for about 10 seconds. Curl your toes under tensing your feet. Hold for about 5 seconds, release. Pause for about 10 seconds.

Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading through your body beginning at your head and going all the way down to your feet. Feel the weight of your relaxed body. Breathe in...and out...in...out....in...out.

### Getting further help

If Anxiety and stress continues to affect you even after you have made changes and used the techniques, please consider the options below:

**Speak to GP**

**Visit contact us page on MyIPRSHealth**