



# PANIC ATTACKS

## Dealing with ANXIETY &

University Counselling Service  
Tel +44 (0)115 951 3695  
Email [counselling.service@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:counselling.service@nottingham.ac.uk)  
[www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling)



The University of  
**Nottingham**

What

is

anxiety

?

ANXIETY IS A NORMAL AND ESSENTIAL PART OF ALL OUR LIVES.

Anxiety can motivate achievement, push us to run faster in a race, to play better in a competition, to think more quickly in an exam. Anxiety also mobilises us to deal with threatening situations. It is not possible or even desirable to eliminate anxiety and worry from our lives. Life would be dull and dangerous without it.

Anxiety is a physiological response to a perceived threat or danger. When we feel unsafe or uncomfortable, we experience heightened arousal, alertness and physical tension. Symptoms of anxiety may include:

- Tense muscles, discomfort, unease, fidgeting, restlessness, tics, twitching, trembling
- Headaches
- Irritability, aggression, anger
- Mind racing with worrying thoughts
- Sleep disturbance, disturbing dreams
- Breathlessness, over-breathing
- Sweating, flushing, blushing
- Palpitations, racing heartbeat
- Needing frequent trips to the toilet
- Nausea, light-headedness
- A sense of depersonalisation, unreality
- A desire to avoid or get away from the situation

**WE MAY START TO RESTRICT OUR LIVES in an attempt to avoid potentially uncomfortable situations. Anxious thoughts disrupt our concentration and we may feel overwhelmed particularly when we are under pressure to perform.**

Some people cling to friends and constantly seek reassurance when they feel anxious; others withdraw and become isolated. These responses can be difficult for those around us to understand. Sometimes we may not even recognise that we are anxious and may attribute these symptoms to other causes.

Anxiety is very common. 9% of the general population were identified as suffering from a clearly identified anxiety disorder in the 1995 OPCS Household Survey and a survey of students at the University of Nottingham in 1998 found raised levels of anxiety among students, particularly around exams and coursework deadlines.

If anxious thoughts and feelings become particularly intense, messages to the brain can trigger a chain of automatic physiological reactions, which prepare us to fight, run away or hide from danger. This is known as the *fight, flight or freeze* response. Unfortunately these physiological responses are not helpful when we are sitting in an exam room, socialising or about to do a presentation. If the *fight / flight / freeze* response is triggered when there is no actual danger to act upon, this may lead to a *panic attack*.

## PANIC ATTACKS

During a panic attack:

- breathing becomes faster, causing hyperventilation
- an excess of oxygen is inhaled, making us feel light-headed and faint
- the heart beats faster, pumping blood to the muscles in preparation for action and producing a tingling sensation in hands and feet
- sweating increases
- the body lightens the load for action by emptying the bladder and bowels
- the urge to get out of the situation as quickly as possible becomes overwhelming
- we may respond angrily if anything gets in our way.

These symptoms can be frightening and bizarre and people often fear they are having a heart attack or going mad. In reality, this is a normal healthy protective mechanism that is being switched on at the wrong time.

## WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

If we interpret a situation or event as a threat to our emotional or physical well being, then we will experience anxiety. These anxieties generally stem from some underlying fear of failure or of being rejected.

Worry and anxiety can become a habit that is hard to break and we may become anxious about feeling anxious. If our general level of anxiety becomes constantly raised, our alarm system may trigger more frequent panic attacks.

On the other hand, some people enjoy exams and large social gatherings; some people like spiders and even pay to go bungee jumping. *It is not the situation itself, but the way we think about it that makes us feel anxious or worried.* This gives us a useful clue to learning to control our anxiety.

## How can you help yourself ?

- Accepting a degree of anxiety as normal, functional and harmless will reduce your fears and help you to regain control. Talking to your GP or a counsellor and finding out more information is likely to be useful. Some self-help books are listed in the resources section.
- If you experience a raised level of anxiety most of the time, find out what helps you to wind down and set time aside to relax on a regular basis.
- Regular exercise, such as walking or swimming, boosts serotonin levels and increases your sense of wellbeing. If you are feeling anxious, a short, brisk walk is likely to help.
- If you tend to be a worrier or if something is troubling you, find someone to discuss it with. A different perspective can help you develop a more objective way of thinking and to escape the loop of anxious rumination.
- You may experience anxiety in specific situations or in response to particular thoughts and feelings. Understanding what triggers your anxiety may help you to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and to develop problem-solving strategies.
- If you are avoiding a situation where you feel particularly anxious, you may consider developing a plan to desensitise yourself to this situation, step by step, perhaps with the support of a friend.
- Medication may be helpful in coping with a crisis or reducing intense anxiety for a short period to allow you to develop some coping strategies. See your GP if you think this might help.

- Try to resist the temptation to cope with anxiety or sleep disturbance by using alcohol, drugs or tobacco. These may provide temporary relief but they do not resolve the problem and are likely to make things worse. Drugs that depress the central nervous system, such as alcohol, have a rebound effect as they wear off and result in jittery feelings and more anxiety.
- Cut out or cut down on stimulants such as coffee, tea and drinks that contain caffeine and sugar. Stimulant drugs such as amphetamines, tobacco and ecstasy, cause side effects similar to anxiety and are unhelpful.
- If we start to panic, our thoughts and feelings feed the fear. We can prolong, or shorten a panic attack by what we think and the things we say to ourselves. If we understand that a panic attack is a normal, though unpleasant, process that will soon pass, we can reassure and calm ourselves.
- Breathing quickly and taking in excess oxygen creates unpleasant symptoms. Slowing down your breathing and not taking big gulps of air will help immediately.
- Cupping your hands over nose and mouth as you breathe will also help to restore the oxygen/carbon dioxide balance and will have a calming effect.
- If you are having difficulties with your studies or exams, speak to your tutor, the senior tutor or another member of staff in your Department or School, to let them know. Alternatively, get in touch with Academic Support. They may be able to help. For example, arrangements can be made to take exams in an alternative environment if a large exam room presents problems.
- There are many people in the University to whom you can turn for support: These may include your personal tutor, the senior tutor or the Disability Liaison Officer in your Department or School; your hall tutor or hall warden, or any other member of staff. They will be able to put you in touch with someone who can offer more specialist help if necessary. There are also other members of the University community such as the chaplains, the Students' Union welfare officer and the welfare reps in halls of residence, whom you may wish to approach.

## How can you help someone else?

- If you think a friend, or someone you know, may be suffering from anxiety, you can offer support and a listening ear.
- Encouraging them to balance work and relaxation and to take breaks from working may be valuable.
- Do not encourage them to use alcohol or drugs to relax or forget their problems. These may bring temporary relief, but they will not resolve the problem and may make it worse.
- There are limits to what you can do and you need to take care of yourself. It may be that a housemate or friend becomes particularly anxious at a time when you are also struggling with coursework or exams. Sometimes demands for constant reassurance may become exhausting for you and provide no real relief for your friend. It may be that they need specialist help or you may need some support or advice yourself. If you are concerned about a friend, or someone who is having problems, then do not hesitate to contact one of the specialist services listed in this leaflet.

## When is specialist help appropriate?

SOMETIMES, SELF-HELP COMBINED WITH PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT from friends and family may enable you to manage your anxiety. If, however, you feel anxious or uncomfortable talking about personal issues with those around you, or if you feel too overwhelmed by anxiety to take the first steps to regaining control, there are a number of resources on campus and in Nottingham where you will find information, advice, treatment or support.

If you prefer to approach someone you know, your personal tutor, the senior tutor or the Disability Liaison Officer in your Department or School, your hall tutor or hall warden or any member of staff, can put you in touch with someone who can offer specialist help. Depending on the nature of the difficulty, different approaches may be suggested:

- At times of acute crises, medication can be helpful in reducing symptoms and allowing you to regain control
- If you experience panic attacks, specific techniques may help you to learn to cope
- If anxiety is a problem, counselling may help you to understand the nature of your difficulty, to learn how to manage the symptoms and to address the thoughts and feelings that create and maintain anxiety
- Where a specific phobia is causing difficulty, you may benefit from learning to cope directly with the situation rather than restricting your activities in order to avoid it.

The resources listed in this leaflet will help you to consider what approach might best suit you and refer you to the appropriate service.

## Where can you find help?

### AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

**The University Counselling Service** offers free, confidential counselling, group therapy and workshops to undergraduate and postgraduate students and to University staff. The Service also offers support to those concerned about the welfare of a friend, housemate, relative or colleague. Counselling is available at University Park, Sutton Bonington, Jubilee and some School of Nursing and Midwifery Centres.

To arrange an initial appointment, telephone **0115 951 3695**, or e-mail **counselling.service@nottingham.ac.uk** or call in to room **A75 Trent Building, University Park**. Visit the web site at **www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling/** for further information and useful self-help links.

- **Your GP** can offer you support, advice, referral to specialist help or medical treatment. If you are registered with **Cripps Health Centre**, telephone **0115 846 8898** (internal extension 75). Out of hours calls will be referred to Nottingham Emergency Medical Services.
- **Academic Support** offers advice, practical help and support to individual students experiencing study problems, in addition to assisting students with dyslexia or a disability. They also offer a range of workshops and groups throughout the academic year.  
For details, visit their web site at **www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicssupport** or contact them at **Student Services Centre, Portland Building**, telephone **0115 951 3710**.
- Each School appoints a **Disability Liaison Officer** (DLO) to provide advice and guidance for students and members of staff, about disability issues and to offer support. For further information, visit the web site at **www.nottingham.ac.uk/disability/disliaison**
- **The chaplains** offer spiritual and emotional support and guidance, to students and staff of all faiths, or none. Contact the chaplains in the **Portland Building, University Park** or telephone **0115 951 3931**.
- **The Students' Union welfare officer** and the welfare reps in hall offer advice and support. Contact them through the **Student Advice and Representation Centre** in the **Portland Building**, telephone **0115 846 8730**.
- **Nightline**, telephone **0115 951 4985**, offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students which is available from 7pm-8am every night during term-time.

#### LOCAL AND NATIONAL RESOURCES

- **Nottingham Counselling Centre**, 32 Heathcote Street, Hockley, Nottingham, telephone **0115 950 1743** offers confidential, subsidised counselling to any individual aged over 20.
- **Speakeasy at Connexions**, 24-32 Carlton Street, Hockley, Nottingham telephone **0115 992 6102**. Offers free counselling, information and support for young people aged between 13 and 25.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day. Telephone **08457 90 90 90** (calls charged at local rate).
- **MIND** (National Association for Mental Health). For details of local service contact *Mind* online telephone **0845 766 0163** or visit their website [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

#### FURTHER READING

- **Overcoming Anxiety A** self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural techniques. (*Helen Kennerley, Robinson*).
- **The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook** (*Edmund J Bourne, New Harbinger Publications*) takes a holistic approach and offers much useful advice and practical ways of managing anxiety, panic attacks and phobias.
- **Mind over Mood** (*Dennis Greenberger and Christine A Padesky, The Guilford Press*) concentrates on identifying and challenging the way we think and encouraging more realistic, balanced thoughts and beliefs, to manage how we feel and behave.
- **Exam Stress** (*pamphlet available from the University of Nottingham Counselling Service*) provides hints and tips on coping with exam stress.