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University Counselling Service

Dealing With Anxiety and Panic Attacks

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and essential part of everyone's life. It can motivate achievement; push us to run faster in a race, to play better in a competition or 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, which 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 as a way of avoiding potentially uncomfortable situations. Anxious thoughts can disrupt concentration, and we may feel overwhelmed particularly when we are under pressure to perform.

Some of us turn to our friends and seek reassurance when we 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.

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 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 wants to lighten the load in order to be ready for action alerting you to the need to empty 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 feel frightening, and people often fear they are having a heart attack or are physically ill in some way. Usually, the physical symptoms are the result of a normal, healthy protective mechanism that is being switched on at the wrong time but if you are worried, it is worth asking your GP to check this for you.

What causes anxiety?

If we interpret a situation or event as a threat to our emotional or physical wellbeing, then we will experience anxiety. These anxieties often originate from an underlying fear though we may not know where it comes from.

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. Self-help resources are likely to be useful.
- If you experience a raised level of anxiety most of the time, explore what helps you to regulate and 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 disturbances by using alcohol, drugs, or tobacco. These may provide temporary relief, but they do not resolve the problem and in the longer term might 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 that are like anxiety and are unhelpful.
- If we start to panic, our thoughts and feelings feed the fear. We cannot necessarily stop a panic attack by what we think but we can make it feel less

frightening. 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. Regulating your breathing and trying not to take in big gulps of air will help immediately.
- Cupping your hands over your nose and mouth as you breathe will also help restore the oxygen/carbon dioxide balance and will have a calming effect.

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 available. A link to a directory of support can be found at the end of 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 worried 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 several resources on campus and in Nottingham where you will find information, advice, treatment or support.

You can talk with your personal tutor or the Support and Wellbeing Officer in your department or school, and they can signpost you to 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 breathing and self-regulating techniques may help you to learn to cope
- If anxiety is impacting your life significantly, a counselling consultation 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 to avoid it

A link to a directory of resources is at the end of this leaflet.

Further reading

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