

Coping with anxiety

Anxiety can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, wealth or background. Recent research suggests that as many as 1 in 6 young people will experience an anxiety condition at some point in their lives, which means that up to 5 people in your class might be living with anxiety.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal, if unpleasant, part of life, and it can affect us all differently. The charity Anxiety UK says anxiety can make a person imagine that things in their life are worse than they really are, and prevent them from confronting their fears.

There are a few common types of anxiety:

- **Separation anxiety** – triggered by being away from parents, guardians or friends
- **Social phobia** – triggered by social situations, such as meeting new people
- **Selective mutism (SM)** – an inability to speak in certain places or in certain situations
- **Specific phobia** – a feeling of intense, illogical fear towards an object or situation, e.g. the dark
- **Exam stress/anxiety** – panicking to the point that you're unable to concentrate
- **Chronic worrying / Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** – a constant state of high anxiety

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety exists because of a set of bodily functions that have existed in humans from our cave-man days. Back then, we were equipped with an **internal alarm system** designed to protect us from the dangers surrounding us, such as predators. This system was extremely useful – it would make us hyper-alert by giving us a boost of adrenaline that would increase the heart rate and increase the amount of oxygen travelling around our body, so we were better able to fight

the cause of the threat or run to safety – this is known as the **‘fight or flight’ response**. The butterfly sensations that many people experience during anxiety is this system kicking in. However, people who suffer from anxiety will often experience the symptoms of anxiety in **normal, every-day situations** that do not require a fight or flight response.

Some people are able to identify the cause for their anxiety, such as a **big change** in their life (such as changing schools), a **build-up of stress** (such as a series of upcoming deadlines), or a **traumatic incident** (such as the loss of a loved one).

Other people, however, might find it difficult to explain why they feel anxious, as it seems to **appear out of nowhere**. Very often, this is because they have already experienced a build-up of stressful factors. If enough of these factors build up, a very small trigger can then tip them over the edge, kind of like a bucket of water overflowing:

Common symptoms of anxiety

People often experience physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms of anxiety.

Common physical symptoms:

- increased heart rate
- increased muscle tension
- ‘jelly legs’
- hyperventilation (over breathing)
- dizziness
- feeling sick
- a dry mouth

Common psychological symptoms:

- feeling on edge and alert to everything around you
- wanting to run away or escape the situation
- feeling as though people are looking at you and observing your anxiety
- thinking that you might die
- thinking that you might lose control

Common behavioural symptoms:

The most common behavioural symptom of anxiety is **avoidance**. If being in busy rooms tends to trigger your anxiety, it's natural that you will avoid or leave busy rooms to get some immediate relief. However, this is only a short-term solution and the symptoms of anxiety will return next time you're in a busy room. Avoiding busy rooms may also psychologically reinforce the message that they are dangerous. You will never get to find out whether your fear of busy rooms is logical and justified.

Getting better

Everyday ways to cope

Returning to the bucket analogy, the best way to reduce an anxiety overflow is to create **lots of holes** in the bucket to avoid it overflowing. Each one of these holes could be something positive that you do to manage your anxiety, such as:

- yoga and exercise
- reading
- listening to music
- playing a video game
- spending time with friends and family
- talking to others

Many anxiety disorders begin in childhood and adolescence, and the average time a person waits to seek help for their condition (particularly for OCD and chronic worrying) is over 10 years. That's a long time to be feeling anxious! You can save yourself a lot of stress by **talking to someone to get help**. Often, because the symptoms of anxiety are so bad, we don't want to tell anyone how we feel because we believe that they might not understand, or they might laugh at us. However, it is the best way to get help to change how you feel.

Here are some of your options:

- **Talk to someone you trust** – choose a parent, family member or teacher who you trust, tell them how you have been feeling and try to give them an example so that they understand quickly. If you find it difficult to talk to them about it, try writing it down for them.
- **Talk to a professional** – professionals are specially trained to help you discuss how you are feeling and help you to put things into place to make it better. They will keep all of the information that you tell them private. You could try reaching out to one of the following:
 - **A counsellor** – someone who will provide you with a safe place to talk about your experiences and help you to look at where these feelings have come from.

- **Cognitive behavior therapist (CBT)** – someone who will help you to understand how you are feeling in the ‘here and now’ and how the problem can be managed more effectively. They will help you to practise certain behaviours and thoughts to try to improve what you are feeling.
- **Clinical Hypnotherapist** – someone who will use visualisation techniques (e.g. asking you to picture events going well and places that you feel safe in) to improve your anxiety.

Other resources

- [Anxiety UK](#) – ring 08444 775 774 between 9.30am and 5.30pm Monday to Friday to speak to someone in complete confidence, or email support@anxietyuk.org.uk to be put in the direction of further help and support. Their website is also packed with useful information.
- [The Mix](#) is a support service for young people to help them with anything from mental health to money and finding a job. You can talk via phone, email text message or one-to-one chat. [Click here for details.](#)
- If you’re a student, your university might operate [Nightline](#) – a confidential listening and information service run for students by students. [Click here to see if it can be accessed through your university.](#)
- [No Panic](#) – these are the people to call if you’re suffering from panic attacks, OCD, phobias and other related anxiety disorders.
- [Childline](#) – if you’re under 19, you can confidentially call, email or chat online about any problem, big or small.