

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is an important mechanism to protect us from danger and aid our survival. But it can sometimes become overactive, to the extent that it is not helpful. Symptoms can include a racing heart, dry mouth, breathing fast, stomach aches or nausea. You may also have upsetting thoughts telling you that you cannot cope or will never get better, trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep, feeling irritable or unable to concentrate during the day. You may also try to avoid situations, thoughts and images, for example those that remind you of being ill.

Many people experience anxiety after stressful life events. Even if you had occasional mild anxiety, since becoming ill with Covid-19 your anxiety may have got much worse. Or you may be experiencing significant anxiety for the first time in your life.

There are different types of anxiety. This can include a general, free floating anxiety or anxiety about something specific such as your finances. Or anxiety about going out and socialising. Some people may fear of being re-infected and getting ill again, which could lead to becoming too focused on cleanliness, handwashing and hygiene. Some people may have been at home for so long that it feels strange to be going out doing normal things and mixing with other people again. You may find yourself worrying a lot about your health and any new symptoms. Some people experience trauma as a result of being ill. This is particularly the case for people who were hospitalised and ended up in intensive care. You might experience flashbacks or have memories or nightmares about being unwell and some of the experiences you went through as a result of this.

It is important to recognise that you have experienced a challenge to your health and wellbeing from a new disease, during a global pandemic. It is understandable to have some anxiety as a result, and as time passes your anxiety is likely to reduce. In the meantime there are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better.

Techniques for Coping with Anxiety

Understand your anxiety: keep a note of when you feel most anxious to try to identify what is triggering your anxiety. This can give you clues about what you need to take action on.

Problem solving: try to brainstorm all the possible practical solutions to what is bothering you. Write them down on a piece of paper. It might help to do this with a friend or family member. This can help you feel less overwhelmed and you might think of some easy practical steps to take that can reduce your anxiety.

Time for Worry: set aside a period of time when you allow yourself to worry so that the rest of the time you can get on with your day. If you can, try to identify what your concerns are and try some practical problem solving during your 'worry time'.

Distraction: focus the mind elsewhere, perhaps looking at your environment and think about what you can see, what you can smell, what you can feel or touch. Or distract yourself with an activity that keeps you occupied- for example, practical tasks around the home, a hobby you enjoy, doing some gardening or phoning a friend.

Relaxation: You can practice relaxation in a number of ways. This could include focusing on your breathing, taking deep slow breaths in through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. If deep breathing is difficult or painful, you can try a visualisation exercise where you think of a pleasant memory or experience. Try to imagine it in as much detail as you can, through all of your senses. Some people find it helpful to try physical activities such as gentle yoga, stretching or going for a walk. Or you can try having a warm bath, or some massage to aid relaxation.

Mindfulness: This is slightly different to relaxation. It is a technique to help you connect with the present moment through all of your senses, observing your bodily sensations, your environment and your thoughts without getting caught up in them and without any judgement. It can help you to become more self-aware, feel calmer and can help you to cope with upsetting or unhelpful thoughts. There are many apps and guides for mindfulness exercises that you can try (see below).

Getting support from others: It can be helpful to share how you are feeling with a friend or family member. They might be able to offer advice, reassurance or just provide a listening ear. Talking to someone else can help to lessen your anxiety, as it can help to put things in perspective.

Further Self Help

Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust website (www.cntw.nhs.uk) has a wide range of detailed self-help guides on coping with different types of anxiety- e.g. general anxiety, health anxiety, panic, post-traumatic stress, social anxiety, and stress. Go to the section on the website called 'Self Help Guides'. The guides are available in different formats including easy read guides, audio guides, and British Sign Language videos. The Your COVID Recovery Website also has useful information on looking after your mental health while recovering from Covid-19 (www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk)

You can also see the NHS approved apps list nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health and websites such as 'Headspace' and 'Finding Peace in a Frantic World'. The NHS approved, free apps specifically designed to help with worry include 'Chill Panda' and 'Worry Tree'.

Getting More Support

If your anxiety is not improving and is starting to affect your daily life, it might be helpful to get further support. You can access confidential, psychological support from local NHS services that can provide a range of different treatments, including talking therapies. Ask your GP or health professional to refer you, or you can refer yourself by filling in a self-referral form on their website. Contact details are provided below:

Brighton and Hove: Brighton and Hove wellbeing Service, Tel 0300 002 0060 Monday-Friday 9am-5pm. You can refer yourself by filling in a short online referral form by visiting www.brightonandhovewellbeing.org

West Sussex: Time to Talk, Monday to Friday 8am-5pm. Chichester and Bognor area: 01273 265967; Adur, Arun, Chancetonbury, Worthing: 01903 703540; Mid Sussex: 01444 251084; Crawley and Horsham: 01403 620434. Self-referral through website www.sussexcommunity.nhs.uk, then type 'Time to Talk' into search box

If you have been diagnosed with Long Covid and live in West Sussex you can access the **Time to Talk Health** service, staffed by professionals with specialist training in supporting people with various health conditions, including Long Covid. Their phone number is 01273 666480. Alternatively you can self-refer by visiting their website www.sussexcommunity.nhs.uk/ttth

East Sussex: Health in Mind, Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm. Tel: 0300 00 30130, or self-refer by visiting www.healthinmind.org.uk. For people who have been diagnosed with Long Covid, please contact the **Health in Mind Long Term Conditions** Service using the same contact details as above.