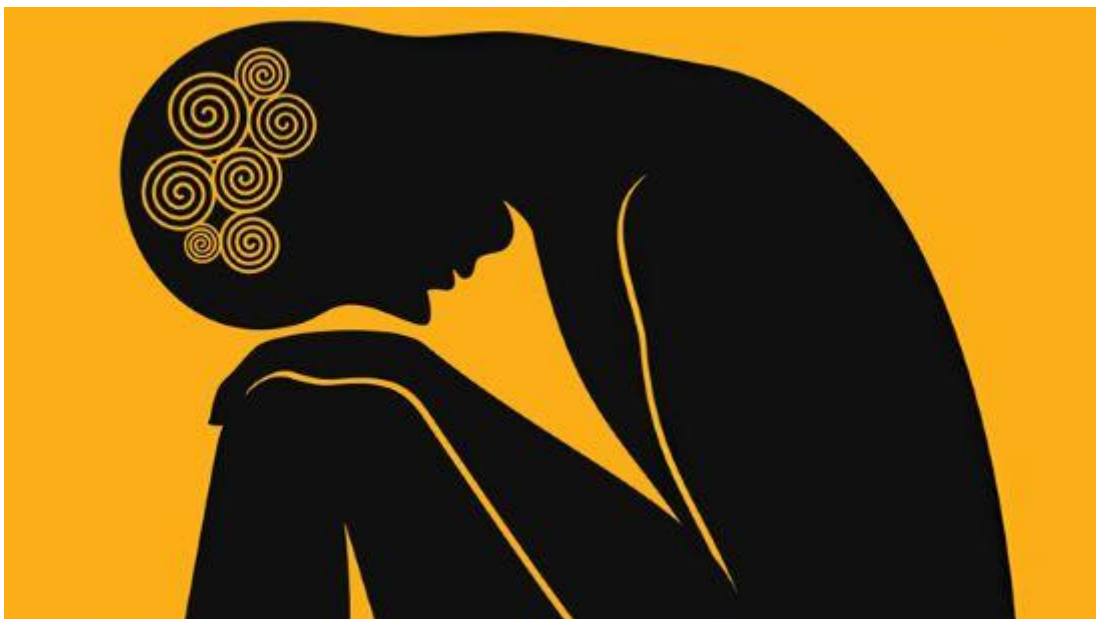


ANXIETY AND PANIC



**Tips on dealing with feelings of
anxiety and panic**

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotional and physiological response to feeling threatened. People differ as to how vulnerable they feel in different situations: this can be influenced by past experiences, as well as by the beliefs and attitudes they hold about these situations.

When people describe anxiety, they tend to use words such as worry; nervousness; fear; panic; tension and dread.

Some general situations which often cause anxiety include:

- Bullying
- Coping with work and exams/homework
- Preparing to leave school
- Adapting to life at school/college
- Appearance
- Giving presentations, or performing in social situations
- Dealing with relationships or the lack of relationships/friendship issues
- Sexuality issues
- Coping with change
- Expectations

Sometimes it is specific situations that are anxiety provoking:

- Apprehension about entering new situations
- Having to deal with people in authority
- Worrying about whether you have chosen the right subjects
- Panic about facing exams
- Worrying about social acceptance and approval, or about failure, criticism or rejection from others
- Fears about health

The experience of anxiety can range from mild uneasiness and worry to severe panic. At a reasonable level, short bursts of anxiety can motivate us and enhance our performance, but if anxiety becomes too severe or chronic, it can become exhausting and debilitating.

Anxiety typically involves an emotional component (fear, nervousness), a physiological component (fast breathing, trembling, dry mouth, heart racing, stomach churning) and a cognitive component (frightening or negative thoughts; I'm going to fail/make a fool of myself/lose control). These can then affect our behaviour, for example, by putting off or stopping work, avoiding people or situations or not sleeping.

How can you help yourself?

First of all, you need to know that anxiety is entirely normal. Everyone feels anxious when they are in a stressful situation and they feel vulnerable. Feeling anxious does not mean that you are 'weak' or 'abnormal'.

In fact, a certain level of stress can be very helpful; it can motivate us, be exciting or invigorating and enable us to reach higher and meet new challenges. After all, if we never tackled things that we have found challenging, that we were uncertain that we could succeed at, we would stop learning or moving on in life.

However, too much stress can seriously interfere with living a normal life. Nonetheless, acute anxiety states are time-limited and will start to fade away in a relatively short period of time. Even when the anxiety is intense, you can still probably function better than you expect, and other people are often unaware of how you are feeling.

Here are some strategies you can try for yourself:

1. Review the stressful circumstances in your life

Think about all the things that are going on in your life that might be causing you stress. Where possible, try to find practical solutions to reduce these sources of stress.

They might include:

- Saying 'no' to things you do not want to do
- Giving up unnecessary, time-consuming activities and responsibilities
- Confronting work problems by talking to your tutor or Head of Year
- Using an organised and realistic plan of action to tackle projects
- Asking for information or feedback if helpful
- Discussing a relationship problem

Be prepared to acknowledge what feels right for you and be kind enough to yourself to respond to your needs. Increase your ability to cope with stress by looking after your health, which includes trying to eat well, exercise regularly and rest properly. Support from other people is very important, so spend time with supportive friends and/or family members. Doing enjoyable activities, either on your own or with other people is also important, so continue with your hobbies or interests and consider taking up something that you have wanted to do for a while.

If you are uncertain about what is making you anxious, talk this through with a trusted adult (or online services such as *Kooth* or *Childline*) on how to explore and understand the anxiety and how to deal with it.

2. A rational approach to challenging negative thoughts

When people are very anxious, they tend to exaggerate how threatening a situation is and to underplay how effectively they can cope with that situation. Our thoughts are distorted by our emotional state, and it can help to 'stand back' and evaluate the situation more realistically when you feel calm. Below is a rational approach to put the fears into perspective, to challenge their validity or to find an alternative view of your situation. Ask yourself questions such as these:

Are you judging yourself harshly?

Are you focusing on your failures and forgetting your successes? Have you managed to survive similar situations in the past (or even to succeed despite them)?! Are you judging your entire existence on the basis of this one event or one part of life, or are you expecting to be perfect?

Are you 'catastrophising'?

Are you seeing things in all or nothing terms, or assuming that to not succeed would be an absolute catastrophe?

Are you worrying about the future?

- Are you assuming that you know what will happen in the future?
- What evidence have you got that your fears are valid?
- Are you exaggerating the chance of something going wrong or minimising the possibility of your working it out fine?
- Are you spending time frightening yourself about situations that you aren't actually facing at present, and which may never happen?

Are you comparing yourself to others?

- Are you assuming that everyone else is doing fine except you, when you don't actually know how others are feeling or managing?
- Are you blaming yourself for things that you cannot control, or are not your responsibility?

Two examples of challenging irrational thinking:

Irrational: *"I'll make a fool of myself in front of the rest of the class and they won't like me".*

Rational: *"A lot of people will be feeling anxious like me. If I try to be friendly and pleasant, people have responded well to that in the past – I should be able to do it this time as well".*

Irrational: *"I'm going to fail my exams".*

Rational: *"I have been doing some revision. The work is supposed to be challenging. I can do it".*

3. Distract yourself

Some people find it more effective to distract themselves from their frightening thoughts, perhaps by repeating a calming phrase to themselves such as "Stay calm and relaxed, I will feel better soon", or by doing mental arithmetic or saying the alphabet backwards. You can also try to distract yourself by focusing your attention on some external stimulus such as listening to a conversation, watching television, or becoming aware of what is going on around you. If you can stop attending to frightening thoughts, these will no longer be able to fuel your anxiety.

NB. This is not the same as avoidance! It aims to help you stay *in* the stressful situation, not to opt *out* of it.

4. Grounding Techniques

Grounding techniques can be very useful when we feel distressed, particularly when the distress makes us feel very unreal or detached, or it feels like we are in a different situation to where we really are.

Anxiety often makes us feel very detached, dissociated or unreal. Grounding techniques help to bring us back to the here and now, with an awareness of our own bodies. They are strategies that help us to be in the present moment, in reality, rather than in the traumatic experience of the past or current distress.

Practice them and learn what works best for you – whether it's a mental strategy like telling yourself you're safe now, or maybe doing something more physical. The aim is to turn your focus of attention away from the past or current distress and into the here and now, of reality and safety.

5 4 3 2 1 (repeat as required)

5 – things you can see

4 – things you can touch

3 – things you can hear

2 – things you can smell

1 – take 1 deep breath

A – Z (go through the alphabet, repeat as required)

Animals

Girls names / Boys names

Countries / Celebrities

Grounding Questions (say out loud)

What is your full name?

What is your date of birth?

Where are you right now?

What is the time?

What is the date?

What is the weather like?

Grounding Statements (say out loud – repeat as required)

I'm safe

This feeling will pass

5. Face the Situation

Confronting, rather than avoiding anxiety-provoking situations, also helps. When anxiety occurs in certain situations, it has become a learned response to those situations and it is a question of learning a new (relaxed) response. If you make yourself stay in the feared situation for long enough, the anxiety will reduce over time, until it is completely extinguished. You could draw up a hierarchy of your feared situations, confronting the least threatening first and experience the diminution of your anxiety in that situation, before progressing to a slightly more threatening situation in your hierarchy.

6. Learn to Relax

The physical symptoms of anxiety occur because adrenaline is released by the nervous system into the blood stream and affects organs such as the heart, stomach and muscles. Relaxation and breathing exercises can help you to control these symptoms. You can learn how your body feels when it is relaxed if you tense different parts of your body (eg arms, hands, legs, neck, shoulders and forehead) for a few seconds, and then allow them to relax. Try to keep your breathing slow and regular so that you do not hyperventilate, which makes the physical symptoms worse.

Try relaxation and breathing exercises. Download a free app like *Headspace* or *Calm*. Relaxation exercises need to be practiced when calm. You will become better able to relax in stressful situations with increasing practice.

Panic Attacks

A panic attack is a severe experience of anxiety. People may feel intense dread, experience various physical symptoms and have extreme thoughts of losing control, going mad, having a heart attack or dying. It is also possible to become afraid of the panic attacks themselves because the experience can be so unpleasant. Paradoxically, this tends to make a person even more prone to having an attack. Although panic attacks can be very frightening, they are not actually harmful. People do not actually have heart attacks, develop psychiatric illnesses or die from them!

Here are some strategies to help in the event of a panic attack:

- Remind yourself that a panic attack **will** end!
- Remind yourself that panic attacks are **not** actually dangerous!
- Remind yourself of any previous occasions when you handled a similar situation well.
- Picture a person you trust or who cares about you and imagine the person is with you offering encouragement.
- Focus on the present moment and on the things around (outside of) you – observe their shape, colour, sounds ...
- Stop what you are doing and **slow yourself down** for a moment! Breathe more slowly and gently (though not actually holding your breath). Then continue what you were doing, **slowly**.
- Take a big sigh, stretch out, then flop and relax.
- If you are able, take some gentle exercise, eg go for a stroll.
- Get angry! Don't let this anxiety (or situation) get the better of you!

When to seek further help

Anxiety can affect your health only when it becomes chronic and severe, so it is important that you seek help if you think that this is the case:

- If the anxiety problems do not start to improve despite trying the ideas above
- If your fears are persistent and difficult to control
- If your anxiety is stopping you from living a normal life, or if you are avoiding important activities

Where to get help

- Talk to a trusted adult, your parent/carer or a trusted close friend
- Talk to your Tutor, Head of Year or member of staff
- Talk to Mrs Coles, Westfield Academy's Safeguarding Lead and/or Ms Broom, Deputy Safeguarding Lead
- Talk to your GP

Links:

[Kooth.com](https://www.kooth.com)

[Childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk)

[Youngminds.org.uk](https://www.youngminds.org.uk)

[YoungSomerset.org.uk](https://www.youngsomeset.org.uk)



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