



A Practical Guide

Understanding

Anxiety

What it is, why it happens, and how to begin feeling better

Hope Therapy & Counselling Services

contact your GP, call 999, or reach Samaritans on 116 123 (free, 24/7).

This resource is for informational and self-help purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional support. In crisis, please

www.hopefulminds.co.uk

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What Is Anxiety?

1

Anxiety is a natural human emotion — a signal that your brain has detected a threat or challenge. In moderate amounts it is genuinely useful: it sharpens focus before an important event, motivates preparation, and prompts caution in genuinely dangerous situations.

The difficulty arises when the anxiety response becomes disproportionate, persistent, or starts to affect how you live your day-to-day life. At that point it shifts from a helpful signal into something that can feel overwhelming and exhausting — even when there is no obvious danger present.

Anxiety also exists on a spectrum. Some people experience low-level, chronic background worry. Others experience sudden, intense episodes. Many experience both. Whatever your experience, it is real, it is valid, and it can improve.

"You don't have to be 'falling apart' to deserve support. Many people managing significant anxiety are, from the outside, doing remarkably well — and that makes it lonelier, not easier."

Is anxiety the same as stress?

Stress is typically a response to an external pressure — a deadline, a difficult relationship, financial worries. When the stressor goes, the stress often reduces. Anxiety tends to be more internal — a persistent sense of worry, unease or dread that can linger even when nothing is immediately wrong. Chronic stress can develop into anxiety, and both often need addressing together.

Is anxiety a mental health condition?

Anxiety itself is a normal emotion. When it becomes persistent and significantly impacts your life, it may be described as an anxiety disorder. These are among the most common mental health conditions in the UK — affecting around 1 in 6 people at any given time. They are also among the most treatable. You are far from alone.

What Does Anxiety Feel Like?

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Anxiety can show up differently for different people. Some experience it primarily in their body; others in their thoughts; many in both. Recognising your own pattern is the first step toward working with it rather than against it.

Racing heart — a pounding or fluttering heartbeat, sometimes mistaken for a cardiac problem

Shallow breathing — shortness of breath, chest tightness, or feeling of not getting enough air

Physical tension — tight shoulders, jaw clenching, headaches, or a stiff neck

Stomach symptoms — nausea, butterflies, stomach cramps, or irritable bowel

Sweating & trembling — unexplained sweating, shaking hands, or feeling flushed

Sleep problems — difficulty falling or staying asleep, or waking feeling unrested

Racing thoughts — a mind that won't slow down, replaying events or catastrophising

Hypervigilance — constantly scanning for threats, over-noticing things that might go wrong

Avoidance — steering clear of situations, people, or places to manage fear

Seeking reassurance — repeatedly checking, asking others for comfort, or over-researching

Indecision — overthinking choices for fear of making the wrong one

Irritability — feeling on edge, snapping at people, or being easily overwhelmed

The Science Behind Anxiety

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The Fight-or-Flight Response

When your brain detects a threat — real or imagined — it activates your sympathetic nervous system, triggering a cascade of physical changes designed to help you survive. This is the fight-or-flight response, and it evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to protect us.

Heart rate increases — to pump oxygen-rich blood to your muscles quickly

Breathing quickens — to bring in more oxygen and expel carbon dioxide faster

Brain goes on alert — the amygdala (your brain's alarm system) takes over from rational thinking

Muscles tense — ready for action, which is why anxiety often causes physical aches

Digestion slows — non-essential processes are paused, causing nausea or stomach upset

Pupils dilate — to take in more visual information from the environment

The Problem: A Brain That Can't Tell the Difference

Your brain cannot reliably distinguish between a physical danger (a car swerving towards you) and a psychological one (an awkward email, a social event, a 'what if' thought). It responds to both in the same way — activating the full alarm system.

Over time, the brain can become increasingly sensitive — learning to fire the alarm more quickly, at lower thresholds. This is why anxiety often feels as though it is getting worse over time without intervention, and why avoidance tends to make things worse rather than better.

"Anxiety isn't a character flaw. It's your nervous system doing its job — just a little too enthusiastically."

The Role of the Nervous System

Your parasympathetic nervous system — sometimes called 'rest and digest' — is the natural counterbalance to fight-or-flight. It slows the heart rate, deepens breathing, and restores calm. Many of the techniques in Section 6 work precisely because they activate this system directly.

Common Types of Anxiety

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Anxiety manifests in many forms. You may recognise yourself in one of these, or in a combination of several. A qualified therapist can help you understand your own specific experience more clearly.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Persistent, wide-ranging worry about many areas of life — work, health, finances, relationships — that feels difficult to control. Often described as always waiting for something to go wrong. The worry tends to move from topic to topic rather than being fixed on one thing.

Social Anxiety

Intense fear or self-consciousness in social situations — presentations, meetings, parties, even casual conversations. Driven by fear of being judged, embarrassed, or rejected. It is much more than shyness and can lead to significant avoidance and isolation.

Panic Disorder

Recurrent, unexpected panic attacks — sudden surges of intense fear accompanied by strong physical symptoms (racing heart, dizziness, shortness of breath) that can feel like a heart attack. Fear of having further attacks can itself become disabling.

Health Anxiety

Excessive, persistent worry about having or developing a serious illness. Often accompanied by frequent body-checking, seeking reassurance from doctors, or avoidance of medical information. Reassurance offers only brief relief before worry returns.

OCD & Intrusive Thoughts

Unwanted, repetitive thoughts or mental images (obsessions) that cause significant distress, and behaviours or mental acts (compulsions) performed to reduce that distress. Compulsions provide short-term relief but maintain the cycle long-term.

Phobias

An intense, persistent fear of a specific object, situation, or activity — such as flying, spiders, needles — that is disproportionate to any actual danger. Phobias can significantly limit daily life and are highly treatable.

Post-Traumatic Stress (PTSD)

Anxiety that develops following a traumatic experience, often involving flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, emotional numbing, and avoidance of trauma reminders. PTSD can develop immediately after trauma or months later.

Perinatal Anxiety

Anxiety experienced during pregnancy or in the first year after birth. Often overlooked in favour of discussions of postnatal depression — perinatal anxiety is common and very treatable with the right support.

Self-Assessment Checklist

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This checklist is not a diagnostic tool — only a qualified professional can assess and diagnose. It can help you identify patterns and give language to your experience.

How I feel in my body

- I often notice my heart racing or pounding, even when I haven't been physically active
- I frequently feel tightness or discomfort in my chest
- I experience shortness of breath, or feel like I can't get a full breath
- I get headaches, muscle tension, or physical aches that don't have a clear cause
- I have stomach problems — nausea, cramps, or digestive issues — linked to stress or worry
- I struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep because my mind is busy
- I feel tired much of the time, even when I haven't done much
- I feel physically on edge, restless, or unable to relax

How I think

- I find myself worrying about things that haven't happened yet
- My mind often jumps to worst-case scenarios
- I replay conversations or events, wondering if I said or did something wrong
- I find it hard to concentrate because my mind is elsewhere
- I have intrusive or unwanted thoughts that are difficult to dismiss
- I often feel a vague sense of dread, even when nothing specific is wrong
- I overthink decisions, even small ones
- I struggle to switch off or 'be present'

How I behave

- I avoid situations, places, or people because of anxiety or fear
- I seek reassurance from others more than I'd like to
- I check things repeatedly (locks, symptoms, messages)
- I find it hard to say no, or feel responsible for managing others' feelings
- I use alcohol, food, or other behaviours to manage how I feel
- I have stopped doing things I used to enjoy because of anxiety
- I keep busy to avoid sitting with my thoughts
- My anxiety has affected my work, relationships, or daily life

If you ticked several items, you are not alone — and this is not something you have to manage on your own. See Section 11 to find out how Hope Therapy can help.

Self-Help Techniques & Exercises

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These techniques are drawn from evidence-based approaches including CBT, mindfulness, and nervous system regulation. None of them are a cure for anxiety – but practised regularly they can meaningfully reduce its intensity and help you feel more in control.

Breathing Techniques

1

Box Breathing (4-4-4-4)

- Breathe IN slowly for 4 counts
- HOLD for 4 counts
- Breathe OUT slowly for 4 counts
- HOLD for 4 counts
- Repeat 4–6 times

Why it works: Activates the parasympathetic nervous system and lowers cortisol. Best used at the onset of anxiety or before a challenging situation.

2

Extended Exhale (4-7-8)

- Breathe IN for 4 counts
- HOLD for 7 counts
- Breathe OUT slowly for 8 counts
- Repeat 4 times

Why it works: The extended exhale is particularly powerful for calming the nervous system. Especially effective before sleep or during a panic response.

3

Physiological Sigh

- Take a full breath IN through your nose
- At the top, take one more short sniff IN to fully inflate the lungs
- Then exhale completely and slowly through your mouth
- 1–2 repetitions is often enough

Why it works: The fastest known way to reduce physiological arousal. Works within seconds.

Grounding Techniques

4

The 5-4-3-2-1 Technique

- Name 5 things you can SEE around you
- Name 4 things you can physically TOUCH – and touch them
- Name 3 things you can HEAR
- Name 2 things you can SMELL (or like the smell of)
- Name 1 thing you can TASTE

Why it works: Engages all five senses to anchor you in the present moment, interrupting the anxious thought spiral.

5

**Body
Scan &
Release**

- Sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes
- Bring attention slowly from the top of your head to your toes
- Notice where you are holding tension (jaw, shoulders, stomach)
- On each exhale, consciously soften and release that area
- Take your time — 5–10 minutes if possible

Why it works: Anxiety lives in the body. This practice develops body awareness and directly reduces physical tension.

Thought-Based Techniques

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**Name
It to
Tame
It**

- When anxiety arises, pause and name what you're feeling
- Use specific language: "I notice I'm feeling anxious about..."
- Avoid fighting the feeling — just observe and name it
- You can also name the type: "This is catastrophising." "This is my 'what if' mind."

Why it works: Labelling emotions transfers activity from the amygdala (emotional brain) to the prefrontal cortex (rational brain), reducing intensity.

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**The Thought
Record
(CBT)**

- Write down the anxious thought exactly as it came
- Rate how strongly you believe it (0–100%)
- Ask: What is the evidence FOR this thought?
- Ask: What is the evidence AGAINST it?
- Write a more balanced alternative thought and re-rate

Why it works: Cognitive restructuring — the foundation of CBT — helps loosen the grip of unhelpful thinking patterns over time.

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**Worry
Postponement**

- Choose a specific daily "worry time" — 15–20 minutes, same time each day
- When a worry arises outside that time, note it down briefly
- At worry time, review your list — many worries will feel less urgent

Why it works: Contains worry to a defined period rather than allowing it to run throughout the day.

Reflection Exercises

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These exercises invite you to reflect on your anxiety more personally. You can write directly in the spaces below, or simply sit with the questions.

Exercise 1: Mapping Your Anxiety

Think about a recent time when you felt anxious. Explore it fully:

- What triggered it? (Situation, thought, or feeling)
- What did you notice in your body?
- What thoughts were going through your mind?
- What did you do in response? (Avoid, seek reassurance, push through, etc.)
- Looking back, what might have helped in that moment?

Exercise 2: The Costs and the Protections

Anxiety often has a complicated relationship with us. It causes real difficulties — but sometimes it also feels like it is protecting us from something.

- In what ways does your anxiety cause difficulty or hold you back?
- Is there anything your anxiety feels like it is protecting you from? (E.g. failure, rejection, uncertainty)
- If your anxiety reduced significantly, what might become possible for you?

Exercise 3: Your Anxiety Patterns

Anxiety rarely strikes randomly. It tends to follow patterns. The more clearly you can see yours, the more effectively you can work with it.

- When is your anxiety typically at its worst? (Times of day, situations, triggers)
- What tends to make it better, even temporarily?
- What would you most like to change about how anxiety affects your life?

Looking After Yourself Day to Day

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Anxiety rarely exists in a vacuum. The way we sleep, eat, move, connect, and rest all contribute to our overall resilience. These aren't quick fixes — but small, consistent changes in these areas build real wellbeing over time.

Sleep

Anxiety and poor sleep feed each other in a cycle. Prioritise consistent sleep and wake times, avoid screens for 30–60 minutes before bed, and limit caffeine after 2pm. If anxious thoughts arrive at bedtime, keep a notepad nearby to jot them down and 'park' them until morning.

Movement

Regular physical activity is one of the most robustly evidence-based ways to reduce anxiety. Exercise metabolises stress hormones (cortisol and adrenaline), boosts mood-regulating neurotransmitters, and improves sleep. Even a brisk 20-minute walk daily makes a measurable difference.

Caffeine

Caffeine directly stimulates the sympathetic nervous system — the same system activated during anxiety. For many people, reducing or eliminating caffeine noticeably reduces physical anxiety symptoms. This includes energy drinks and large quantities of tea.

Alcohol

Alcohol may feel calming in the moment, but it disrupts sleep, depletes key neurotransmitters, and significantly increases anxiety the following day. If you are using alcohol regularly to manage anxiety, it is worth speaking with a professional about healthier coping strategies.

Connection

Isolation is anxiety's best friend. Talking to someone you trust — even briefly — activates the social nervous system and can genuinely reduce anxiety. Connection doesn't have to mean disclosure — simply spending time with people you feel safe with helps.

Social Media & News

The 24-hour news cycle and social media algorithms are designed to keep you engaged through stimulation and concern. For many people with anxiety, this acts as constant fuel. Consider time-limited use, particularly in the morning and before bed.

Mindfulness & Stillness

Regular mindfulness practice — even 10 minutes a day — has been shown to reduce anxiety over time by strengthening the prefrontal cortex's ability to regulate the amygdala. Apps such as Headspace, Calm, or Insight Timer can be a helpful starting point.

Time in Nature

Research consistently shows that time in natural environments reduces cortisol levels and lowers physiological arousal. A walk in a park, time near water, or simply sitting somewhere green can have a measurable calming effect.

When to Seek Professional Support

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Self-help strategies are valuable, but they have limits. Therapy offers something different: a safe, consistent, professional relationship in which you can explore the roots of your anxiety and work through it in depth.

Consider reaching out for professional support if any of the following apply:

Anxiety is significantly interfering with your work, studies, or daily responsibilities

Your relationships are being affected — you're withdrawing, arguing more, or struggling to be present

You are avoiding more and more situations to manage fear

You are using alcohol, substances, food, or other behaviours to cope with anxiety

You have experienced one or more panic attacks

You have felt this way for several weeks or more without improvement

Self-help strategies have not been sufficient on their own

Your anxiety is accompanied by low mood, hopelessness, or a loss of pleasure in things you used to enjoy

You are experiencing intrusive thoughts that feel distressing or out of control

You feel as though anxiety is running — or ruining — your life

"Seeking support is not a sign of weakness. It is one of the most self-aware and courageous things you can do."

How Therapy Can Help

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Many people are unsure what therapy actually involves, or worry that it means talking about difficult things endlessly without resolution. Here is a plain overview of the approaches most commonly used for anxiety.

CBT – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

CBT is one of the most extensively researched treatments for anxiety. It works by helping you identify unhelpful thought patterns and the behaviours that maintain anxiety, and then practise changing them. CBT is typically structured, goal-focused, and practical. Many people find that the skills they learn in CBT stay with them long after therapy ends.

Person-Centred Counselling

A warm, non-judgemental space in which you explore your feelings at your own pace. The therapist's role is not to advise or direct, but to offer genuine acceptance and empathy. This approach is particularly helpful for those who want to be truly heard and to make sense of their experience without being given a programme to follow.

EMDR – Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing

EMDR is particularly effective when anxiety is linked to past trauma, distressing memories, or a specific event. It uses bilateral stimulation (usually guided eye movements) to help the brain reprocess traumatic material in a less distressing way. Many people find that memories which once felt raw become less charged after EMDR.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy uses a guided, deeply relaxed state to access and reframe unhelpful patterns held below conscious awareness. It can be particularly effective for phobias, health anxiety, performance anxiety, and breaking entrenched habits. You are always in control during hypnotherapy. Please note: hypnotherapy is offered by qualified practitioners and is not covered by our NCPS Organisational Membership, which applies to counselling and psychotherapy.

Integrative Therapy

Many therapists work integratively – drawing from multiple approaches tailored to the individual. This means your therapy is not rigidly defined by one model but is shaped around what works best for you, your history, and your goals.

What does a first session look like?

At Hope Therapy, we begin with a free 15-minute consultation where you can ask questions, briefly share what brings you to therapy, and get a feel for whether it feels like the right fit. There is no pressure and no commitment required. Your first full session will typically involve your therapist

getting to know your background, understanding what you'd like to work on, and agreeing on how you might work together.



We're here when you're ready.

Thank you for reading Understanding Anxiety.

Taking the first step can feel like a lot.
A free 15-minute consultation costs nothing
and commits you to nothing.

No pressure. Just a chance to see
whether we might be able to help.

Book your free consultation:
calendly.com/hopetherapy/15-minute-consultation

What to expect from your free call:

15 minutes, no charge, no commitment
Tell us briefly what brings you to therapy
Ask any questions you have
Get a feel for whether it feels like the right fit

Our services include:

Individual counselling · Couples counselling · CBT · EMDR · Hypnotherapy
Online sessions across England · Face-to-face in selected locations
Specialist support for LGBTQIA+ individuals and neurodiverse clients
All therapists are qualified and registered with appropriate UK professional bodies

www.hopefulminds.co.uk

Sessions are confidential. There are limited circumstances where this may need to change — for example, if there is a serious risk of harm — and your therapist will explain these at the outset.

Hope Therapy does not provide crisis support. In crisis: Samaritans 116 123 · SHOUT text 85258 · Emergency services 999