

# Anxiety



**“It ain't no use putting up your umbrella till it rains!”**

Alice Caldwell Rice

**“is like a rocking chair-it gives you something to do but it doesn't get you anywhere.”**

Van Wilder, 2002

**“Sometimes we experience fear without a reason as anxiety, a persistent alerting to unspecified dangers and a kind of physical shakiness; or as worry, a persistent round of ruminating thoughts which project bad outcomes for all events, large or small.”**

Dorothy Rowe (Beyond Fear)

Anxiety is nature's early warning system and essential to our survival. This month, we'll be looking at how to recognise the symptoms and what you can do to help yourself.

Everyone feels anxious from time to time. From a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach, to the ruminating thoughts going round and round in your mind, anxiety is a universal and uniquely human experience.

Some measure of anxiety is necessary for life to continue. This is 'good' anxiety – sometimes we need an extra push to get through something that is proving to be a challenge. Here it is motivational. The 'fizzy' nerves before an exam, for example, can help provide focus, clarity of thought and an extra burst of energy. Anxiety can be creative. The state of 'not knowing' what happens next can often be the precursor to a flurry of productivity.

However, 'bad' or chronic anxiety states, where we can become paralysed by fear and worry, are not helpful, and actively get in the way of recovery. Too much anxiety can be harmful.

If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the **CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline** is available for practical and emotional support.

## What on earth is happening to me?

At the sharp end of anxiety, panic states can make you feel very ill at ease. You may feel your heart racing, beating too fast, palpitations. You might feel the urge to run or shout and scream. Sometimes you might feel like you need the loo quickly, feel sick, nauseous, sweaty, hot, shaky or faint. Because it is a very bodily felt emotion, it is easy to misread some of these signals for life-threatening illness (cardiac failure, stroke, for example). If this bothers you, why not eliminate your concerns and get yourself checked out by your GP. All of these feelings, which are very unpleasant, are in response to the increase in adrenaline and stress hormones, which cause the heart to begin to beat faster to provide the muscles and brain with an increase in oxygen supply.

If we were faced with an obvious threat – a car heading towards us say – we would be very grateful to our bodies for preparing us so readily. Once the danger had passed, we would be still and quiet and allow ourselves to steady and rebalance. As long as we don't interfere, our bodies and mind will get on with the business of maintaining equilibrium. Once these feelings have been felt, a memory gets 'recorded'. It's as if our body/mind says "Never again will I be caught in that situation!" And if we don't get the opportunity to go back and face our fears, it's then that safety behaviours can get activated.

### Safety behaviours

- avoidance of places, people, activities where the anxiety was felt
- not going out for fear of being seen
- fearing being alone
- avoiding public transport or public places
- sticking rigidly to routines so much so that they become superstitious rituals – "If I avoid the pavement cracks, I won't get anxious"
- eating, drinking, smoking

What is important to note about all the safety behaviours is that they actually, in the end, contribute to anxiety prolonging, because you never find out that the feared situation (dying, vomiting, fainting, going 'mad', falling apart), never actually happens. So you, your body, never has the opportunity to learn that the anxiety will reduce naturally. Sometimes this is referred to as graded exposure, and a particular kind of therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy has been shown to be very effective in helping some to overcome their need for safety behaviours and face their fears. CiC offers a computer guided programme, Living Life to the Full interactive, which incorporates CBT ideas and methods. Ask your CiC advisor today about how to access the program.

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## Worry is not a predictor of outcome

The other form of anxiety, worry, can be summed up neatly by two simple statements:

- Something awful is going to happen
- I can't/won't be able to cope

For instance:

- I'll lose my job and never get another
- My partner will leave me and I will fall apart
- My child isn't doing as well as she should in her exams

This kind of future-focused anxiety, where there is an anticipated feared situation we call ruminating. It can be very tiring and above all, pointless, in

that no amount of excess worrying alters the outcome. Most of the things we worry about never actually come to pass. Test this for yourself. Think of what you were worrying about a year ago today? Can you remember exactly? Are you still worrying about it? Did a years' worth of worry make any difference to the situation? Worry here becomes habitual and keeps us busy. Often we worry, rather than act, because we fear the consequences of our actions even more. Once we begin to catch these kinds of thoughts, and sometimes they happen so automatically, we don't realise they are happening, we can begin to substitute them for different thoughts:

cont...

- I might lose my job, but I'll be given notice, and I have good skills and experience.
- My partner may leave, and it will be difficult and painful, but I'll cope with the support from good friends and family
- If my child doesn't get the grades for that university, then life will take them on a different journey.

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## Keep Calm and Carry On

Those five words, taken from government produced material around the blitz weren't just empty words, they really do point the way forward for dealing with anxiety producing situations. One of the simplest things you can do to lessen anxious feelings is to breathe properly. A famous study, The Framingham Heart Study, followed participants over 30 years and down generations, found that those that followed relaxation exercise that focus on the breath had

major physical and mental health benefits. This might sound odd, given that we are breathing all day, every day (a staggering 17,000-23,000 breaths a day) but breathing in this focused way can help to reduce breath rate from an average of 16 to 4 breaths per minute. Breathing is free, always available and you don't have to join a gym! All you need is 5 minutes, a space, and the willingness to focus your attention.

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## Sleep & Anxiety

All of us who have experienced anxiety know something of the frustration of not being able to sleep because we are too anxious. It can become a vicious circle. We are exhausted from feeling anxious, but can't get respite or switch off. If this is the case, you need to spend some time paying attention to good sleep hygiene.

The first point is the most obvious one. Are you ready to sleep? Work out a 'wind down' routine for yourself. This is personal, and needs to come from you. For some, a bath is a good preparation, for others a walk round the block with the dog. Hot milk drinks for some are helpful. What is certain is that we all sleep easier when our stomach is full and we are warm. Imagine a baby and the loving care a parent pays to preparing them for sleep. Can you do that for yourself?

Next, is the bed comfortable? Is the room too hot or too cold? Well ventilated? Do you have a partner who disturbs your sleep? Try changing the sheets! Something as simple as providing yourself with fresh bedding can have a good effect. Your bed needs to be somewhere inviting

and associated with warmth and comfort. Switch off the light and any light sources in the room, and make sure you have a well-fitting curtains or blinds. Melatonin, the so-called sleep hormone is produced by the pineal gland only in the absence of light. So, try to avoid falling asleep in front of the TV or any backlit electronic devices. If it helps to have sounds to distract you, try falling asleep with the radio on, rather than the television. One simple trick if you find you wake early is to imagine that the alarm is going to go off in 2 minutes, safe in the knowledge that you have many hours to sleep.

### **In short:**

- Prepare your mind and body for sleep
- Stick to a routine
- Avoid stimulants for 2 hours before bed (caffeine, nicotine, alcohol)
- Make sure your sleeping space is comfortable, ventilated and dark
- Count backwards from 300
- If sleep evades you, try breathing exercise

## A problem shared

There are sometimes when all the breathing techniques in the world aren't going to help us work through our anxieties. We all know the benefit of being able to talk through what is bothering us with good friends, family, partners, but there are sometimes when we don't want to discuss personal issues with those close to us. The objectivity and non-judgemental space offered by a therapist can be beneficial to air

distressing thoughts and worries. If you feel you would like to have someone to talk to confidentially, then call Confidential Care and discuss with an advisor how some therapy may be of benefit to you. Debt problems, money worries, care for elderly parents, relationship difficulties, problems with our children, stresses at work, all these issues can be confidentially discussed with our trained advisors.

## One final thought...

It is easy when we are caught up in the business of life, to forget that every moment in our lives whether positive or negative is temporary. Everything passes and everything comes round

again. So the next time you are in an anxious state, remind yourself that this too will pass. It is only thing of which you can be certain.

## Reading List

### Mindfulness for Beginners

*by Jon Kabat-Zinn*

### Beyond Fear

*by Dorothy Rowe*

### Overcoming Anxiety For Dummies, UK Edition

*by Elaine Iljon Foreman, Charles H. Elliott PhD, Laura L. Smith PhD*

## Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations

[www.well-online.co.uk](http://www.well-online.co.uk)

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

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