

ANXIOUS & OVER IT?

Understanding and
managing anxiety

Anxiety.

The Signs & Symptoms

Worry is a common human experience - one that visits all of us on occasion. It's generally made up of thoughts, emotions and responses to uncertain situations which might play out in our lives and affect our personal wellbeing or the people we care about.

Worry can be useful at times, if it helps us solve problems or make important decisions. But sometimes this worry takes the wheel and begins to steer many of our waking thoughts. With so much worry on one's mind, the body may then begin to react as if it's in a constant state of threat – with chronic tension, heightened heart rate, shallow breathing, nausea, trembling and numbness following suit.

What might anxiety look & feel like?

A GP or registered psychologist might recognise anxiety as a problem for you if you are regularly experiencing a range of the following over a six-month period:

- ___ Persistent worry about things that are out of proportion to their potential impact
- ___ Perceiving situations, events and people as threatening, even when they aren't
- ___ Constant overthinking, catastrophising and imaging worst-case scenarios
- ___ Inability to set aside worry, relax and calm down
- ___ Difficulty concentrating, focusing and feeling like the mind "goes blank"
- ___ Muscle tension or aches and pains
- ___ Trembling, fidgety and restless
- ___ Fatigue and trouble sleeping
- ___ Nausea, diarrhea or digestive issues
- ___ Panic attacks, or a sudden episode of intense fear that triggers physical responses that make you think you're losing control, having a heart attack or even dying.

It's important to note that some of these symptoms might also be due to the side-effects of medication, or drug and alcohol use.

Why do we get anxious?

Anxiety appears to have a biological basis that evolved with us to help maintain our survival. Back when we existed in tribal communities for hundreds of thousands of years, it made sense to remain vigilant about our own and our tribe's wellbeing. After all, if we were attacked by bears or plagued by starvation, it would likely be game-over.

Now, we exist in a world which is a great deal safer, however, our brain is still wired to pick up on things around us that might be interpreted as potential threats - these might include:

- ▶ study or work concerns
- ▶ concerns around health
- ▶ financial stress
- ▶ family stress or stress within your relationships
- ▶ stress from global or political issues (including the pandemic)
- ▶ the fear of the unknown and an uncertain future
- ▶ being embarrassed, judged or rejected by others.

When we find a threat, our nervous system switches into 'Fight or Flight' mode, revving up our heart rate, speeding up our breathing, making it hard to relax or focus. When this mode becomes our default, it can wreak havoc on our physical and mental wellbeing.

“Most of the things I worry about never happen anyway.”

- Tom Petty

Exercise 1.

Hello Anxiety

To manage our anxiety, it can be helpful to notice the things going on in our internal experience. Anxiety will manifest differently for all of us, so it's worth knowing how it shows up for you.

Think back to a time when you were experiencing anxiety. Reflect on what was coming up inside your mind and within your body.

The *thoughts* in your head?

("I'm going to fail", "This is all too much.", etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The *feelings* you're experiencing?

(Anxiety, anger, stress, panic, overwhelm, frustration, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The way your body *feels*?

(sweaty, nauseous, restless, tense, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The *behaviour* your exhibiting?

(stress eating, under-sleeping, overworking, withdrawing, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Exercise 2.

Worry Exploration

When we're worried, it's easy to imagine the worst-case scenario. In reality, these worries don't often come true. What could happen is not the same as what will happen.

- ▶ **What are you worried about?**
- ▶ **What evidence is there that your worry will not come true?**
- ▶ **If your worry does not come true, what will probably happen instead?**
- ▶ **If your worry does come true, how will you handle it? Will things eventually be okay?**
- ▶ **After answering these questions, how has your worry changed?**

Exercise 3.

Play your ACE

Three steps to managing anxiety and overwhelm in the moment.

- 1. ACKNOWLEDGE your thoughts & feelings.**
Silently and kindly acknowledge whatever is showing up inside you, including thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations, urges, etc.
- 2. COME BACK into your body.**
Push your feet down into the floor, press your fingertips together, stretch out your body, fill your lungs with deep breathing.
- 3. ENGAGE in where you are and what you are doing.**
Get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on where you are and what's happening around you.

Notice 5 things you can see

Notice 4 things you can hear

Notice 3 things you can feel

Notice 2 things you can smell

Notice 1 taste in your mouth

These exercises have been adapted from CBT and ACT principles, including Russ Harris's Dropping Anchor exercise.

WHO TO CALL

SUPPORT ACT WELLBEING HELPLINE: 1800 959 500

LIFELINE: 13 11 14

BEYOND BLUE: 1300 22 4636

SUICIDE CALL BACK SERVICE: 1300 659 467

MENSLINE AUS: 1300 78 99 78

If you're concerned for your immediate safety or the safety of others, call 000.