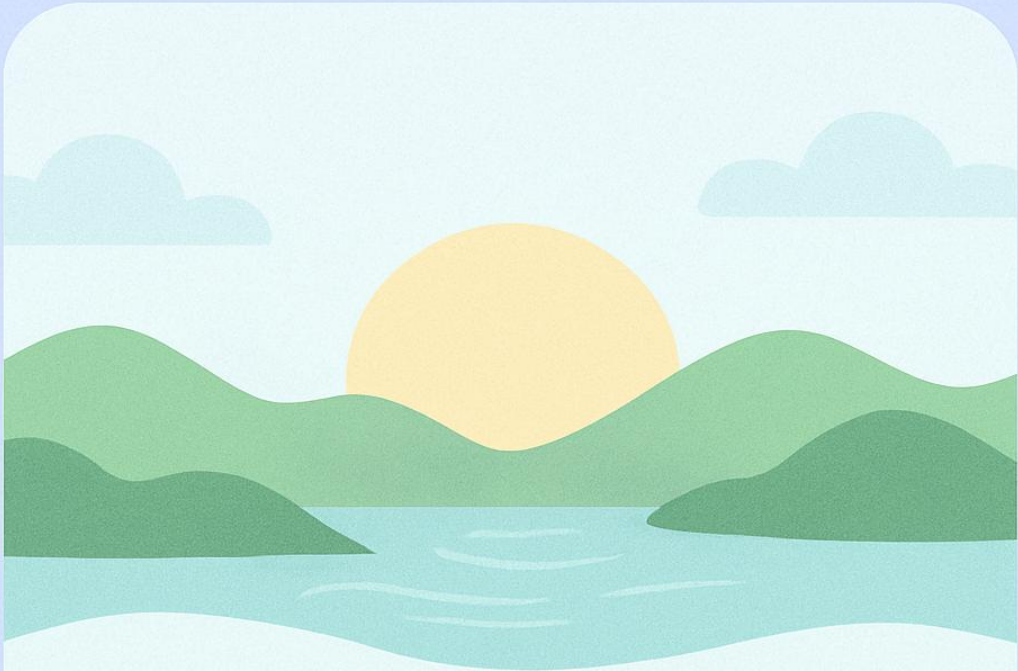




ANXIETY REDUCTION GUIDE



Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural part of being human. It's the body's alarm system and designed to keep us safe by alerting us to danger. However, for many people, this system becomes overactive. Instead of only turning on in real emergencies, anxiety may activate in everyday situations, for instance, regarding work, social interactions, or even without clear triggers.

What Anxiety Feels Like

- Physical symptoms: racing heart, shortness of breath, chest tightness, sweating, dizziness, or shaking.
- Mental symptoms: constant worry, fear of losing control, intrusive thoughts, difficulty concentrating.
- Behavioral symptoms: avoiding situations, restlessness, reassurance-seeking.

Why It Happens

Anxiety is linked to the brain's fight-or-flight response. When we perceive a threat, the amygdala signals the release of stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol). This primes the body to react quickly. This is helpful in survival situations but distressing when the "threat" is simply giving a presentation or sitting in traffic, or in the absence of a clear threat at all.

Biological Basis of Anxiety

Anxiety involves the complex interaction of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Biologically, anxiety involves several key systems:

The Amygdala: This part of the brain's limbic system is central to processing fear and threat. During anxiety, the amygdala can become overactive, triggering the body's 'fight or flight' response even when there is no real danger.

Neurotransmitters: Imbalances in key neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, norepinephrine, and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), are implicated in anxiety disorders. For example, low levels of serotonin are often associated with depression and anxiety, while insufficient GABA activity can lead to increased excitability and worry.

The Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) Axis: This is the body's central stress response system. When faced with a perceived threat, the HPA axis releases stress hormones like cortisol. Chronic activation of the HPA axis, as seen in persistent anxiety, can have detrimental effects on physical and mental health.

Genetics: A family history of anxiety disorders increases an individual's risk, suggesting a genetic predisposition. However, genetics alone do not determine the development of anxiety; environmental factors also play a crucial role.

Physiological Symptoms: The biological response to anxiety includes increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, muscle tension, and gastrointestinal distress, all mediated by the sympathetic nervous system and the release of adrenaline.

Anxiety Prevalence

Anxiety disorders are common in the UK, affecting a significant portion of the population. Reports from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and mental health charities indicate that millions of people experience anxiety each year. Studies suggest that approximately **1 in 6 adults** in the UK were experiencing a mental health problem, such as mixed anxiety and depressive thoughts, in any given week in early 2022. Anxiety is one of the most prevalent mental health conditions, often co-occurring with depression.

Assessing Anxiety

The Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7) is a useful tool to assess anxiety and includes 7 questions about anxiety symptoms and provides a score to assess severity. Please see page 11 for the scoring criteria of the GAD-7. If completing the GAD-7 it is also useful to know that responses can vary dependent on our mood on the day and time of completion.

GAD-7				
Over the <u>last 2 weeks</u> , how often have you been bothered by the following problems?	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
1. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	0	1	2	3
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying	0	1	2	3
3. Worrying too much about different things	0	1	2	3
4. Trouble relaxing	0	1	2	3
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still	0	1	2	3
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	0	1	2	3
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	0	1	2	3

Total Score — = Add Columns — + — + —

If you checked off any problems, how difficult have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not difficult at all	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult	Extremely difficult
☐	☐	☐	☐

What Are Panic Attacks?

Panic attacks are sudden, intense surges of fear or discomfort that peak within minutes. They often feel overwhelming and can mimic medical emergencies, leading many people to fear they are having a heart attack.

Common Symptoms

- Pounding heart or palpitations
- Sweating or chills
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or tightness
- Nausea or dizziness
- Feelings of unreality (derealization) or detachment (depersonalization)
- Fear of losing control or dying

The Cycle of Panic

1. Trigger (external or internal, such as a bodily sensation).
2. Alarm reaction (fight-or-flight symptoms kick in).
3. Catastrophic interpretation (“I’m dying,” “I’ll faint”).
4. Increased fear (symptoms intensify).
5. Reinforcement (the brain learns to fear the sensations, making future attacks more likely).

Evidence-Based Approaches to Anxiety

Psychological research has developed several proven methods to reduce anxiety and panic symptoms.

1. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a highly effective, evidence-based psychotherapy approach that helps individuals manage anxiety by identifying and changing unhelpful thinking patterns and behaviours. These approaches include:

Cognitive Restructuring: This involves challenging negative or irrational thoughts that contribute to anxiety. Techniques include identifying cognitive distortions (e.g., catastrophising, black-and-white thinking) and replacing them with more balanced and realistic perspectives.

Exposure Therapy: Gradually exposing individuals to feared situations or objects in a safe and controlled environment helps to reduce avoidance behaviours and desensitise the fear response. This can be done through real-life exposure, imagined exposure or even virtual reality.

Problem-Solving Skills: Developing strategies to effectively tackle specific problems that trigger anxiety can reduce feelings of helplessness and increase a sense of control.

Relaxation Techniques: Learning and practicing techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness meditation can help manage the physical symptoms of anxiety.

CBT Exercises

1. Cognitive Restructuring: Identifying and Challenging Anxious Thoughts

This exercise helps you become aware of negative or irrational thought patterns that contribute to anxiety and learn to challenge them with more balanced and realistic thinking.

- Identify the thought: When you feel anxious, write down the specific thought that is going through your mind (e.g., "I'm going to fail this presentation.").
- Examine the evidence: List the evidence that supports this thought and the evidence that contradicts it.
- Challenge the thought: Ask yourself: Is this thought 100% true? What's a more balanced or realistic way of looking at this? What would I tell a friend in this situation?
- Replace the thought: Write down a more balanced and realistic alternative thought (e.g., "I've prepared for this presentation, and while I might feel nervous, I'm capable of doing a good job.").

2. Identifying Strengths

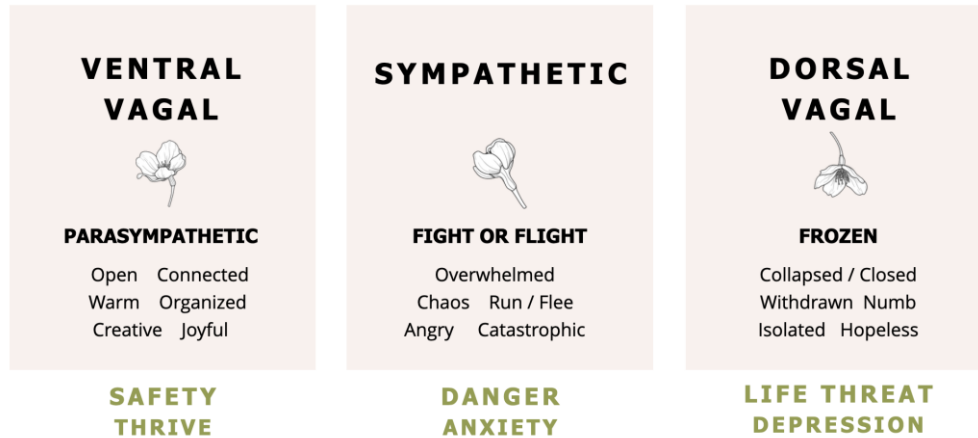
- Focus on your positive attributes and past successes to build self-efficacy.
- Make a list of your strengths, skills, and positive qualities.
- Recall times you have overcome challenges or achieved goals.
- Remind yourself of these strengths when feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

2. Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal theory was developed by Doctor Stephen Porges and includes exercises to regulate our nervous system and increase calm and reduce anxiety. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) responds to perceived threats and safety via the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. There are three branches of the ANS:

1. **Ventral Vagal ('Safe and Social'):** The "rest and digest" state involves feelings of safety, connection, and regulation. This is the optimal state for well-being.
2. **Sympathetic ('Mobilisation'):** Fight or flight response, characterised by increased heart rate, alertness, and energy. Useful for immediate danger but can lead to anxiety if chronically activated.
3. **Dorsal Vagal ('Shutdown'):** Freeze or shutdown response, characterised by a sense of disconnection, hopelessness, or feeling stuck. This is a primitive survival state.

POLYVAGAL THEORY THREE BRANCHES OF AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM



Polyvagal Exercises

Polyvagal techniques guide you towards the ventral vagal 'safe and social' state, reducing anxiety and increasing feelings of calm and connection. Below are some simple but effective ways to shift the nervous system to feel in the safe state.

1. **"Humming" or "Singing"**: Vibrations from humming or singing stimulate the vagus nerve, promoting relaxation and social connection. Hum a tune softly for a few minutes.
2. **Gentle Neck Rolls or Shoulder Rolls**: Releasing tension in the neck and shoulders can help activate the ventral vagal pathway. Perform slow, deliberate movements.
3. **"Slow" or "Sway"**: Gently rocking your body from side to side, either standing or seated, can be very grounding. Imagine a gentle wave moving through you.
4. **Deep, "Sighing" Breaths**: Inhale deeply, and as you exhale, let out a long, audible sigh. This mimics a natural relaxation response.
5. **Mindful Movement/Gentle Stretching**: Engaging in slow, mindful movements like Tai Chi, gentle yoga, or even a slow walk can help reconnect you with your body and activate the ventral vagal state.
6. **"Smell the Roses, Blow Out the Candles"**: A specific breathing technique where you inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, as if smelling a flower, and exhale slowly and completely through pursed lips, as if blowing out a candle.

It is best to practice these techniques regularly, not just when you feel anxious. Consistency can help retrain your nervous system towards a more regulated state.

3. Mindfulness and Acceptance

Mindfulness can help us to observe thoughts and sensations without judgment. Setting aside some time to practice mindfulness can help bring us into the present moment and calm the mind.

Mindfulness has profound biological effects on the brain and body, particularly in mitigating anxiety. Chronic anxiety is often linked to an overactive sympathetic nervous system, leading to increased heart rate, blood pressure, and the release of stress hormones like cortisol. Mindfulness interventions have been shown to counteract these physiological responses.

Reduced Amygdala Reactivity: The amygdala, the brain's 'fear centre', becomes less reactive with regular mindfulness. This means individuals are less likely to experience intense fear or panic responses to perceived threats.

Increased Prefrontal Cortex Activity: Mindfulness strengthens the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for executive functions like emotional regulation, planning, and decision-making. This enhanced control helps individuals manage anxious thoughts more effectively.

Lower Cortisol Levels: Studies indicate that consistent mindfulness practice can lower circulating cortisol levels, reducing the physiological burden of chronic stress.

Improved Heart Rate Variability (HRV): HRV is a measure of the variation in time between heartbeats, reflecting the balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Mindfulness promotes greater parasympathetic (rest and digest) activity, leading to higher HRV and a greater sense of calm.

Neurotransmitter Regulation: Evidence suggests mindfulness may influence neurotransmitter systems, such as serotonin and GABA, which play roles in mood regulation and anxiety reduction.

Mindfulness Exercises

1. Mindful Breathing (Diaphragmatic Breathing)

This practice directly targets the body's stress response.

Find a comfortable seated or lying position. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your belly. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, feeling your belly rise more than your chest. Exhale slowly through your mouth, feeling your belly fall. Focus on the sensation of the breath entering and leaving your body. Continue for 5-10 minutes, or longer if comfortable.

The slow, deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, counteracting the fight-or-flight response characteristic of anxiety and panic. It anchors your attention to the present moment, diverting focus from anxious thoughts.

2. Body Scan Meditation

This practice cultivates awareness of bodily sensations, helping to detach from anxious physical symptoms and promote relaxation.

Lie down comfortably. Bring your attention to your toes, noticing any sensations without judgment. Gradually move your awareness up through your feet, ankles, calves, and so on, all the way to the crown of your head. Spend a few moments with each part of the body, simply observing what you feel (warmth, coolness, tingling, tension, or nothing at all). If your mind wanders, gently guide it back to the area you are scanning. This typically takes 10-30 minutes.

The body scan helps individuals become more aware of the physical manifestations of anxiety without being overwhelmed by them. By observing sensations with non-judgmental awareness, the tendency to catastrophise physical feelings, which can trigger panic can be reduced.

3. Loving-Kindness Meditation (Metta Meditation)

This practice improves compassion, and acceptance towards oneself and others, which can counteract self-criticism often associated with anxiety.

Sit comfortably. Begin by directing feelings of warmth and kindness towards yourself. Silently repeat phrases such as, "May I be well." "May I be happy." "May I be free from suffering." Gradually extend these wishes to loved ones, then to neutral acquaintances, then to difficult people, and finally to all beings. You can begin with 5-10 minutes and gradually increase the duration.

Anxiety often involves negative self-talk and fear of judgment. Loving-kindness meditation fosters self-compassion and reduces the internal critic, creating a more resilient and accepting internal environment. This can lessen the intensity of anxious thoughts and their impact.

Like the polyvagal techniques regularly, it is best to practice regularly and not just when feeling anxious.

4. Lifestyle Factors

Regular exercise, adequate sleep, balanced nutrition, and reduced caffeine/alcohol intake help stabilise the nervous system. It is good to have regular check-ins on our habits that may be contributing to anxiety. These may include:

Dietary Habits

- Excessive caffeine intake
- High sugar consumption
- Processed foods
- Skipping meals or irregular eating patterns
- Nutrient deficiencies (e.g., magnesium, B vitamins)

Sleep Patterns

- Insufficient sleep duration
- Poor sleep quality
- Irregular sleep schedule (e.g., shift work, jet lag)
- Sleep disorders (e.g., insomnia, sleep apnea)

Physical Activity

- Lack of regular exercise
- Sedentary lifestyle
- Overtraining or excessive exercise

Substance Use

- Alcohol consumption
- Nicotine use
- Recreational drug use
- Over-reliance on certain medications

Stress Management

- Chronic work-related stress
- Relationship problems
- Financial difficulties
- Major life changes (e.g., job loss, grief)
- Lack of coping mechanisms

Social Connections

- Social isolation or loneliness
- Lack of supportive relationships
- Conflict in relationships

Screen Time and Technology Use

- Excessive social media use
- Constant exposure to news and information
- Blue light exposure before bed

Environmental Factors

- Exposure to pollutants
- Noisy or chaotic environments
- Lack of exposure to nature

Coping Skills for Panic Attacks

When a panic attack starts, the goal is not to stop it instantly, but to ride the wave and reduce fear of the sensations.

Grounding Techniques

5-4-3-2-1 Method: Name 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, 1 thing you taste.

Breathing Techniques

Box Breathing: Inhale 4 seconds, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4.

Slow Exhale Breathing: Focus on making exhalation longer than inhalation (e.g., inhale 4, exhale 6).

Self-Talk

Remind yourself: “This is a panic attack. It is uncomfortable but not dangerous. It will pass.”

Remember that you have survived every panic attack and that you are not stuck with them forever. Anxiety can often be the body and mind's way of communicating that there is an unmet need that needs attention. Identifying and meeting unmet needs can lead to a more fulfilling life.

Long-Term Anxiety Management

Building resilience reduces the likelihood and severity of future anxiety.

Daily Practices

Using CBT, polyvagal and mindfulness practices that work for you will help reduce stress and increase awareness.

Healthy Routines

Movement, good sleep hygiene and social connections help strengthen emotional resilience.

Professional Support

Working with a therapist can help you understand the origins of your anxiety and try and resolve the issues that are causing it. In some cases, medication may help regulate brain chemistry.

Summary

Anxiety is a natural response, but when overactive it can become distressing. Panic attacks are intense but not dangerous, they will pass. Coping skills like grounding, breathing, and realistic self-talk help during the attacks. Long-term strategies such as CBT, mindfulness, polyvagal theory and lifestyle adjustments will also reduce overall anxiety.

Appendix

GAD-7 Results Scoring

0 - 4 = No to Minimal symptoms

5 - 9 = Mild symptoms

10 - 14 = Moderate symptoms

15 - 21 = Severe symptoms