

Anxiety

What This Emotion May Be Telling You

Anxiety is part of the body's threat and protection system. It can appear when something feels uncertain, unsafe, important or

difficult to control. A degree of anxiety is normal and can help us prepare, notice risk and take action. But when the alarm stays

switched on, anxiety can become exhausting and begin to restrict everyday life.

Anxiety may be telling you: I sense danger, I need more information, I feel uncertain, something matters to me, I need support, or my nervous system has been under pressure for too long.

What anxiety can feel like

- racing or repetitive thoughts
- a sense that something bad is about to happen
- tight chest, faster heartbeat or shortness of breath
- nausea, butterflies or needing the toilet
- dizziness, shaking, sweating or feeling hot
- muscle tension, jaw clenching or headaches
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- restlessness, irritability or feeling unable to settle
- avoidance, reassurance-seeking or repeatedly checking
- sleep difficulties and waking with worry

Anxiety is an alarm, not always evidence

The anxious brain is designed to ask 'what if?' and search for danger. Sometimes the threat is real and needs action.

Sometimes the alarm is responding to uncertainty, a memory, a prediction or a body sensation rather than an immediate

danger.

Alarm or immediate problem?

What is my anxiety predicting? _____

What is happening right now, as a fact? _____

Is there an action I genuinely need to take? _____

If not, what would help my body recognise that this moment is safe? _____

Anxiety and depression

Anxiety and depression often occur together. Anxiety can keep a person mentally and physically activated, while depression

can reduce energy, hope and motivation. The combination can create a difficult pattern: worrying about tasks, avoiding them,

feeling guilty for avoiding them, and then becoming more anxious and low.

What might anxiety be telling you?

- I need safety. Something may feel threatening physically, emotionally or socially.
- I need clarity. Uncertainty can keep the mind searching for answers.

- I need preparation. Some anxiety reduces when a realistic plan is made.
- I need a boundary. Anxiety may rise when you repeatedly override your limits.
- I need recovery. Lack of sleep, sustained stress and overload can make the alarm system more sensitive.
- I need to face something gradually. Avoidance can bring short-term relief while maintaining fear longer term.

The anxiety cycle

Trigger - anxious thought - body alarm - urge to escape/check/seek reassurance - short-term relief - stronger belief that the situation was dangerous.

This does not mean you should force yourself into overwhelming situations. Helpful change is usually gradual, planned and proportionate.

Map my anxiety cycle

Trigger: _____

My prediction: _____

Body sensations: _____

What I usually do next: _____

What happens to the anxiety afterwards? _____

Worry and uncertainty

Worry often tries to create certainty before certainty is available. The mind rehearses conversations, scans possibilities and

tries to solve future problems in advance. Ask whether the worry is a problem you can act on today or a hypothetical possibility.

If action is possible, make a specific plan. If it is hypothetical, practise returning to the present rather than trying to think your way to complete certainty.

Panic and intense anxiety

Panic can involve a sudden surge of fear with strong physical symptoms such as a racing heart, breathlessness, trembling,

dizziness or a feeling of losing control. The sensations can be frightening, but panic symptoms themselves are not proof that

catastrophe is occurring.

If symptoms are new, severe, unusual or could have a physical cause, seek medical advice rather than assuming they are anxiety.

A grounding reset

- Put both feet on the floor or notice where your body is supported.
- Look around and name five things you can see.
- Let your breathing become slower rather than forcing very deep breaths.
- Relax your jaw and drop your shoulders if comfortable.
- Name the date, place and what is actually happening now.
- Choose one next action rather than solving the whole future.

Anxiety and the body

The body's stress response can change breathing, heart rate, digestion, muscle tension and attention. This is why anxiety can

feel intensely physical. Regulation strategies work best when they are practised gently rather than used as another demand to

'calm down immediately'.

Reassurance-seeking and checking

Asking for reassurance, checking messages, symptoms, locks, work or another person's feelings can reduce anxiety briefly. If

repeated constantly, the relief may teach the brain that checking was necessary for safety.

Try delaying one non-essential check, noticing the urge and allowing uncertainty to exist for a short, manageable period. For

severe or compulsive checking, seek appropriate professional support.

Avoidance

Avoidance is understandable: if something causes fear, moving away brings relief. But repeated avoidance can shrink life and

strengthen the belief that the feared situation cannot be managed.

A more sustainable approach can be graded: identify the smallest tolerable step, repeat it until it becomes more familiar, then

build gradually. Exposure-based approaches are best tailored carefully, particularly where trauma, disability or genuine danger

is involved.

A personal reflection

"For a long time I treated every anxious thought as a warning I had to solve. I checked, replayed conversations and tried to

prepare for every possibility. The biggest change was learning to ask, 'Is something happening now, or is my mind trying to

protect me from uncertainty?' I still feel anxiety, but I do not have to obey every alarm." - illustrative personal reflection

Anxiety and neurodivergence

Autistic and ADHD people may experience anxiety around uncertainty, transitions, sensory overload, executive-functioning

demands, social interpretation, masking, rejection, time pressure or previous experiences of being misunderstood. Sometimes

reducing genuine environmental demands is more appropriate than treating every anxious response as irrational.

Helpful adjustments may include written information, predictable plans, visual schedules, extra processing time, quieter

environments, clear expectations and recovery time after demanding situations.

Social anxiety

Social anxiety can involve fear of being judged, embarrassed, rejected or scrutinised. People may rehearse what to say,

monitor themselves closely, avoid eye contact or events, or analyse interactions afterwards.

Try shifting attention from 'How am I coming across?' towards the conversation or activity itself. Small, repeated experiences of

being present without excessive self-monitoring can help.

Health anxiety

Body sensations are real, but anxiety can increase attention to them and make ordinary changes feel threatening.

Repeated

searching, checking and reassurance may temporarily soothe fear while keeping attention fixed on danger.

New or concerning symptoms should be medically assessed. Once appropriate medical advice has been obtained, it can help

to agree reasonable limits around checking and online searching.

Anxiety in relationships

Fear of rejection, abandonment or conflict can lead to over-explaining, repeated reassurance requests,

people-pleasing or

avoiding difficult conversations. Anxiety may be signalling that security matters, but healthy security also needs trust, boundaries and direct communication.

Turn anxiety into a clear request

What am I afraid might happen? _____

What do I actually need from this person? _____

Can I ask once, clearly and respectfully? _____

What part of the uncertainty will I need to tolerate myself? _____

Workplace anxiety

Deadlines, unclear expectations, conflict, workload, presentations and constant availability can all contribute. Useful responses

include clarifying priorities, breaking work into visible steps, preparing in advance, reducing unnecessary interruptions and

requesting appropriate workplace adjustments where relevant.

Control, influence and uncertainty

- Control: my actions, preparation, boundaries and how I respond.
- Influence: asking, negotiating, sharing information and seeking support.
- Outside my control: other people's thoughts, every future outcome, complete certainty and everything that might happen.

When anxiety needs more support

Professional support is appropriate when anxiety is persistent, distressing, causes significant avoidance, interferes with work,

relationships, sleep or daily functioning, or when coping strategies are no longer enough. Evidence-based psychological

therapies can help with anxiety disorders.

Adults in England can self-refer to NHS Talking Therapies for anxiety and depression in many areas. A GP can also help

assess symptoms and discuss treatment options.

If you cannot keep yourself safe, have thoughts of suicide or self-harm, or there is immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E.; In

England, NHS 111 can direct you to urgent mental-health support. Samaritans can be contacted free on 116 123.

A seven-day anxiety awareness exercise

- Day 1 - Notice your most common anxiety trigger.
- Day 2 - Separate the prediction from the facts available now.
- Day 3 - Notice where anxiety appears in your body.
- Day 4 - Delay one unnecessary reassurance or checking behaviour.
- Day 5 - Take one small step towards something you have been avoiding.
- Day 6 - Reduce one genuine source of overload or uncertainty.
- Day 7 - Review what anxiety was trying to protect and what response was actually helpful.

Books and further exploration

- Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley: CBT-based understanding and practical strategies.
- The Happiness Trap - Russ Harris: ACT-based approaches to difficult thoughts and feelings.
- Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Dr Julie Smith: accessible tools for emotional wellbeing.
- Rewire Your Anxious Brain - Catherine Pittman and Elizabeth Karle: an accessible explanation of anxiety and threat systems.

Clinical and source notes

This resource is informed by NHS information on anxiety, fear and panic and on NHS Talking Therapies, alongside established

cognitive behavioural principles used to understand worry, avoidance, reassurance and the anxiety cycle. Anxiety can involve

psychological and physical symptoms and becomes clinically important when it is persistent, disproportionate or significantly

interferes with daily life.

The guide is educational and does not diagnose an anxiety disorder. Physical symptoms can have medical causes, and new,

severe or concerning symptoms should be assessed appropriately. Trauma-related fear, obsessive-compulsive symptoms,

panic disorder, health anxiety and social anxiety may require more specific assessment and treatment.

What this emotion may be telling you

Anxiety is trying to protect you, but protection systems can become over-sensitive. The goal is not necessarily to eliminate

every anxious feeling. It is to understand the message, respond to genuine problems, support the nervous system and gradually learn which alarms do not require action.

You can feel anxious and still take one steady step. An anxious thought is a signal to notice - not automatically an instruction you must follow.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Understanding emotions without judging them.