

Anxiety - Self Help Guide

A practical guide to understanding what anxiety is doing, reducing its grip, and building a personalised toolkit for difficult moments.

What anxiety can feel like

Anxiety is more than worry. It can affect thoughts, emotions, the body and behaviour at the same time. You may notice a racing heart, tight chest, unsettled stomach, dizziness, sweating, trembling, headaches, muscle tension or an urgent need to escape. Thoughts can become fast, repetitive or focused on what might go wrong. Some people become restless; others freeze, withdraw or feel exhausted.

Anxiety is a normal human alarm system. It becomes difficult when the alarm is repeatedly activated when there is no immediate danger, stays switched on for too long, or begins to narrow everyday life. The sensations are real even when the feared outcome does not happen.

The anxiety cycle

Trigger -> threat interpretation -> body alarm -> anxious thoughts -> coping or avoidance -> short-term relief -> stronger anxiety next time.

Avoidance makes sense because it can reduce distress quickly. The difficulty is that the brain may then learn, 'I escaped, so the situation must have been dangerous.' Recovery often involves changing this cycle gently rather than forcing yourself through overwhelming situations.

Start with curiosity

Instead of asking, 'What is wrong with me?', try: *What has my nervous system noticed? What am I predicting? What do I need right now? Is this a present danger, an uncomfortable feeling, or an old alarm?* The aim is not to argue with yourself. It is to create enough space to choose your next step.

Important: New or severe physical symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be anxiety. Seek medical advice when symptoms are unexplained, concerning or significantly different from your usual experience.

When anxiety rises: a first-aid plan

1. Orient to the present

Look around slowly. Name five neutral things you can see. Notice where you are, the date, and what is actually happening now. Feel the support of the chair or floor. This helps the brain receive information from the present rather than only from the feared future.

2. Make the exhale easy

Do not force a very deep breath if that makes you light-headed. Try a comfortable breath in and a slightly longer, softer breath out. Repeat for one or two minutes. Relax the jaw and drop the shoulders if you can.

3. Reduce the task

Anxiety often makes everything feel urgent. Ask: *What is the smallest useful thing I can do in the next ten minutes?* It may be sending one message, drinking some water, opening a document, stepping outside, or writing down the worry rather than solving it immediately.

4. Name rather than obey the thought

Try changing 'Something terrible is going to happen' to 'I am having the thought that something terrible might happen.' This small change can reduce the sense that a thought is a fact or instruction.

5. Use sensory regulation

Different nervous systems respond to different sensory input. You might prefer quiet, lower lighting, a weighted blanket, rhythmic movement, familiar music, a warm drink, a cool cloth, repetitive hand activity or firm pressure. Choose what is genuinely regulating for you rather than what you think 'should' work.

Quick card: I am noticing anxiety. I do not have to solve everything while my alarm system is high. I can orient, soften my breathing, reduce the task, and decide what needs attention when I am steadier.

Working with anxious thoughts

Separate possibility from probability

Anxiety is very good at producing possibilities. Ask: *What am I predicting? What evidence supports it? What evidence does not? If it happened, what resources or support would I have? What is the most balanced description of the situation?*

Watch for common thinking patterns

Catastrophising: jumping to the worst outcome. **Mind-reading:** assuming you know what another person thinks. **Fortune-telling:** treating a prediction as certainty. **All-or-nothing thinking:** seeing only success or failure. **Emotional reasoning:** 'I feel unsafe, therefore I am unsafe.'

Use a worry container

If worry repeatedly interrupts your day, keep a note titled 'For later'. Record the worry in one sentence and choose a regular 15-20 minute period to review it. At that time, sort worries into: something I can act on, something I need more information about, or something outside my control.

Turn worry into a plan

For a solvable problem, write one specific next action, who can help, and when you will do it. For an uncertainty you cannot solve, practise allowing the unanswered question to remain unanswered for now. Reassurance-seeking can bring short relief but may keep the cycle going when it becomes repetitive.

A compassionate reality check

Ask yourself: *If someone I cared about had this exact fear, what would I say that was both kind and realistic?* Use the same standard with yourself.

Reducing anxiety over time

Approach instead of avoidance - gradually

When safe and appropriate, gradual exposure can help the brain relearn that anxiety can rise and fall without escape. Make a ladder from easier to harder situations. Begin with a manageable step and repeat it enough to learn from the experience. The goal is not to feel zero anxiety before moving on; it is to build confidence that you can cope with anxiety.

Support the body

Regular sleep routines, movement, daylight, hydration and consistent nourishment can all affect how reactive the nervous system feels. Caffeine and other stimulants can intensify physical anxiety for some people. Changes do not need to be perfect: predictable, repeatable routines are often more useful than an ambitious plan that cannot be sustained.

Make life more predictable where helpful

Prepare for transitions, write things down, use reminders, allow recovery time after demanding events, and reduce unnecessary sensory or social load. For neurodivergent people, what looks like 'anxiety' may sometimes include sensory overload, uncertainty, masking demands, executive-function strain or repeated experiences of being misunderstood. Support should address those factors rather than treating every difficulty as irrational worry.

Keep connection available

Identify people you can contact for different needs: practical help, listening, company, professional advice, or simply a familiar voice. Tell trusted people what helps and what does not. A useful support request can be specific: 'Please stay with me for ten minutes while I start this,' or 'I need you to listen rather than reassure me repeatedly.'

Progress is not measured by never feeling anxious. It can look like recovering more quickly, avoiding less, understanding triggers sooner, speaking to yourself differently, or continuing with something meaningful while anxiety is present.

Your anxiety worksheet

Map one recent episode

Prompt	Your notes
What happened just before anxiety rose?	
What did I notice in my body?	
What thoughts or images appeared?	
What did I feel urged to do?	
What did I actually do?	
What helped, even slightly?	
What might I try next time?	

My three go-to strategies: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Getting more support

When self-help is not enough

Consider professional support when anxiety is persistent, causes significant distress, interferes with work, relationships, sleep or everyday activities, leads to substantial avoidance, or when you are relying on alcohol, drugs or other harmful coping strategies. A GP or qualified mental-health professional can help assess what is happening and discuss appropriate options.

Therapies

Evidence-based psychological approaches for anxiety include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which works with thoughts, behaviours and avoidance patterns. Depending on the person and the difficulties involved, other approaches may also be useful, including acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), counselling or psychotherapy, and trauma-informed work where relevant. Treatment should be adapted to the individual rather than applied as a one-size-fits-all script.

Useful reading

Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley.

Overcoming Worry and Generalised Anxiety Disorder - Kevin Meares and Mark Freeston.

The Happiness Trap - Russ Harris.

Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Julie Smith.

A message from Maggie

Anxiety can make your world feel smaller and can leave you questioning yourself. You do not have to tackle every fear at once. Begin with understanding what your anxiety is trying to protect you from, notice the patterns that keep the alarm going, and choose one manageable step. Support can be practical, relational and therapeutic. You are allowed to find an approach that fits you, your nervous system and your life.

Information sources

This guide is informed by established UK guidance and evidence-based psychological approaches, including NICE guidance on generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder, NHS information on anxiety, and CBT/ACT principles. It is educational information and is not a substitute for individual medical or psychological assessment.

If you or someone else is in immediate danger, use emergency services. In the UK, call 999 in an emergency. For urgent mental-health support, NHS 111 can direct you to appropriate help.