

# Anxiety - What's Below the Iceberg?

Looking beneath worry, avoidance and the need to feel safe

**Anxiety is often the part we can name, but it may not be the whole experience.** Beneath it can sit fear of failure, uncertainty, loss of control, overwhelm, sensory overload, previous experiences, masking, perfectionism, low confidence, unmet needs and a deep need for safety.

## The anxiety iceberg

The visible tip might be worry, reassurance-seeking, avoidance, over-preparing, irritability, repeatedly checking, difficulty making decisions, cancelling plans, perfectionism or appearing controlling. Under the water can be the reasons the nervous system has learned to stay alert. Looking underneath is not about over-analysing every anxious thought; it is about understanding the conditions that make anxiety louder.

## What anxiety can look like

Racing thoughts; asking the same question repeatedly; needing certainty; struggling with change; procrastination; avoiding calls, appointments or social situations; stomach discomfort; headaches; disrupted sleep; muscle tension; breathlessness; feeling restless or frozen; becoming tearful or irritable; needing to leave; or appearing highly organised because being prepared feels safer.

## What may sit underneath

|                         |                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Fear of failure</b>  | A belief that getting something wrong could lead to judgement, rejection or consequences.            |
| <b>Uncertainty</b>      | Not knowing what will happen, what is expected or how a situation will unfold.                       |
| <b>Loss of control</b>  | Feeling unable to influence the environment, body, outcome or other people's responses.              |
| <b>Overwhelm</b>        | Too many demands, decisions, emotions or pieces of information competing at once.                    |
| <b>Sensory overload</b> | Noise, light, touch, crowds, smells, movement or cumulative sensory input exceeding capacity.        |
| <b>Past experiences</b> | Earlier experiences can teach the brain to anticipate danger even when the present is different.     |
| <b>Masking</b>          | Constantly monitoring behaviour, expression or communication can create sustained internal pressure. |
| <b>Perfectionism</b>    | Trying to remove all possibility of error can temporarily feel protective but keep anxiety going.    |

# Anxiety in the body and nervous system

Anxiety is a protective system. When the brain predicts threat, the body may prepare to fight, flee, freeze or seek safety. Heart rate can increase, breathing can become quicker, muscles tighten and attention narrows towards possible danger. These responses can happen before a person has consciously worked out what they are afraid of.

## Earlier body signals

A fluttering stomach, jaw tension, feeling hot or cold, needing the toilet, tingling, chest tightness, dizziness, restless movement, difficulty processing speech, becoming unusually quiet, scanning the room, losing appetite or suddenly needing everything to be 'just right' can all be useful clues. Recognising the first 10% of anxiety is often easier to work with than waiting until it reaches 90%.

## Neurodivergence and anxiety

Autistic and ADHD people may experience anxiety alongside sensory differences, executive-function demands, communication uncertainty, interoception differences, repeated experiences of being misunderstood, masking or the effort of navigating environments not designed around their needs. What looks like 'overreacting' may be the final visible part of a long build-up.

## Masking and anticipatory anxiety

Preparing scripts, rehearsing conversations, studying other people's reactions or trying to hide distress can help someone get through a situation, but it can also be exhausting. Anxiety may therefore become strongest before an event, after prolonged masking, or once the person reaches a place where they finally feel safe enough to release the pressure.

## Avoidance: relief now, anxiety later

Avoidance can make complete sense: stepping away reduces distress immediately. The difficulty is that repeated avoidance can sometimes teach the brain that the situation was dangerous and that escape was what kept us safe. Where appropriate, gradual and supported exposure can help the nervous system learn something new. This should be paced carefully, particularly where trauma, sensory distress or genuine risk is involved.

## Anxiety is not always irrational

Sometimes anxiety is responding to a real problem: unsafe circumstances, financial pressure, discrimination, health uncertainty, an unreasonable workload or a relationship where boundaries are not respected. Regulation skills can help the body, but they should not be used to persuade someone to tolerate conditions that genuinely need to change.

## What can help in the moment?

**Reduce the load:** fewer words, fewer decisions, quieter surroundings or a pause.

**Orient:** notice where you are and what is actually happening now.

**Lengthen the exhale:** if comfortable, allow the out-breath to be slightly longer than the in-breath.

**Externalise:** write the worry down rather than holding every part in working memory.

**Clarify:** ask what is known, what is unknown and what the next small action is.

**Support:** use a trusted person, visual plan, reminder or agreed adjustment when this genuinely reduces unnecessary barriers.

# Your anxiety iceberg - reflection

Use this after the intensity has reduced. The purpose is curiosity, not criticism.

|                                   |                                     |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| What was visible above the water? | What might have been underneath?    |
|                                   |                                     |
|                                   |                                     |
| What did I notice in my body?     | What was I predicting might happen? |
|                                   |                                     |
|                                   |                                     |
| What did I need?                  | What helped - even slightly?        |
|                                   |                                     |
|                                   |                                     |

## Sorting worry from problem-solving

**Is there a practical problem I can act on today?** If yes, identify one specific action. If no, notice whether the mind is trying to obtain certainty that is not available. You can acknowledge the worry without spending the whole day trying to solve an unknowable future.

## A small-step plan

**Situation:** What am I facing?

**My predicted outcome:** What am I afraid will happen?

**Evidence:** What supports that prediction and what does not?

**Smallest manageable step:** What could I do without overwhelming myself?

**Adjustment:** What reasonable support would make the step more accessible?

**Review:** What actually happened, and what did I learn?

## Supporting someone with anxiety

Try not to dismiss the fear with 'there's nothing to worry about'. Instead, acknowledge that the experience feels real while helping the person find the next manageable step. Offer clear information, allow processing time, reduce unnecessary uncertainty, and ask whether they want reassurance, practical help, quiet company or space. Reassurance can be helpful, but endless reassurance loops can sometimes strengthen anxiety; collaborative plans are usually more sustainable.

## When anxiety and sensory overload overlap

Ask whether the environment itself needs changing. A quieter room, predictable timing, written information, reduced social demand, headphones, movement breaks or time to recover may be more useful than trying to 'think positively' through genuine overload.

# Building a longer-term anxiety support plan

Anxiety often becomes more manageable when patterns are visible and support is planned before a difficult moment.

## Know your patterns

Notice times, places, people, sensory environments, demands and transitions associated with increased anxiety. Also notice protective factors: sleep, predictable routines, movement, enough recovery time, supportive communication, manageable workload and access to trusted people.

## Make uncertainty smaller where you reasonably can

Use written plans, calendars, clear expectations, travel information, agendas, checklists or advance notice. The goal is not to control every outcome; it is to remove avoidable uncertainty so there is more capacity for the uncertainty that cannot be removed.

## Build tolerance gently

Where avoidance is maintaining anxiety, gradual practice can help. Start small enough that the task is challenging but manageable, repeat it, and allow the nervous system to learn through experience. If a situation is genuinely unsafe, traumatising or inaccessible, the answer may be protection or adjustment rather than exposure.

## A message from Maggie

If anxiety is the part everyone sees, there may be so much happening underneath that nobody else knows about. You may be working incredibly hard to predict, prepare, mask, avoid mistakes or keep yourself feeling safe. Anxiety can make your world smaller, but understanding it can begin to give you choices. You do not have to force yourself through everything. Sometimes the next step is regulation; sometimes it is support; sometimes it is a boundary or an adjustment. Look beneath the worry and ask what your mind and body are trying to protect you from. Then work with that information, one manageable step at a time.

## Books and useful reading

**Overcoming Anxiety** - Helen Kennerley. A CBT-based guide to understanding and working with anxiety.

**Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?** - Dr Julie Smith. Accessible tools for difficult emotions and everyday mental health.

**Unmasking Autism** - Devon Price. Context around autistic masking and self-understanding.

**The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook** - Edmund J. Bourne. A broad self-help workbook covering anxiety-management strategies.

## Sources and clinical context

This psychoeducational guide is informed by established psychological models of anxiety and avoidance, cognitive behavioural approaches, nervous-system arousal, trauma-informed principles and neurodiversity-affirming practice. Useful professional sources include NICE guidance on anxiety disorders, NHS information on anxiety and panic, and National Autistic Society information concerning anxiety, sensory differences and autistic experience.

## When to seek more support

Consider professional support when anxiety is persistent, significantly restricting daily life, affecting eating or sleep, causing frequent panic, interfering with work or relationships, or leading to increasing avoidance. Seek urgent help if you are in immediate danger or unable to keep yourself safe.

**Space to Breathe Therapy**  
Understanding creates change.