

Tourette Syndrome & Anxiety

When worry, pressure and tics feed into each other

Tourette syndrome and anxiety can interact in ways that feel circular. Stress and anxiety can make tics more noticeable for some people, while having tics can itself create worry about being watched, judged, interrupted, misunderstood or embarrassed. The result can be a cycle in which the person becomes anxious about ticcing, tries harder to suppress, becomes more physically and mentally tense, and then has even less energy available for everything else.

Anxiety does not cause Tourette syndrome

Tourette syndrome is a neurological condition. Anxiety does not create Tourette syndrome, and reducing anxiety does not simply make the condition disappear. However, emotional pressure, stress, excitement and tiredness can influence tic frequency or intensity for some people. Understanding that distinction prevents the person being blamed for not being 'calm enough'.

The aim is not to make somebody calm enough to stop ticcing. It is to reduce unnecessary distress and help them feel safer being themselves.

Anxiety about ticcing

A person may worry before entering a quiet room, cinema, classroom, meeting, restaurant or public transport because they are anticipating how others might react to a movement or sound. The fear may begin long before the situation itself. This anticipatory anxiety can make somebody avoid places they actually want to go, arrive already exhausted from worrying, or spend the entire event monitoring their body.

The pressure to suppress

Some people respond to social anxiety by suppressing tics. They may be concentrating intensely on appearing still or quiet while also trying to follow a lesson, conversation or task. Suppression can be uncomfortable and tiring. If the person later tics more in a safer environment, this does not mean the earlier anxiety or Tourette syndrome was exaggerated.

Fear of being watched

Staring, whispering, laughter, imitation or repeated questions can make somebody hyper-aware of their tics. Even well-intended attention can feel uncomfortable. Supporters can help by responding naturally, challenging bullying where appropriate and allowing the person to decide whether they want to explain Tourette syndrome to others.

Panic and overwhelm

Anxiety can sometimes build into panic or intense overwhelm. The person may feel their heart racing, breathing change, dizziness, shaking, nausea, fear or an urgent need to escape. At the same time, tics may increase. Respond to the whole experience rather than repeatedly telling them to control the tics. Reduce demands, use calm language and help them move to a safer or quieter environment if they want to.

Grounding without forcing stillness

Grounding should not depend on keeping the body perfectly still. Someone can orient themselves to the room while ticcing. They might notice their feet against the floor, identify objects they can see, listen for familiar sounds, hold something comfortable, slow their exhale if that feels helpful, or focus on a trusted person's voice. If a technique makes them more aware of tics or increases distress, choose something else.

Make the situation smaller

When anxiety is high, reduce the number of decisions and demands. Instead of asking many questions, offer one or two simple choices: 'Would you like to stay here or move somewhere quieter?' 'Would you like me nearby or would you prefer space?' Small choices can return a sense of control without overwhelming the person.

Avoid reassurance loops

Repeatedly asking for reassurance can sometimes become part of an anxiety cycle, particularly where OCD or strong uncertainty is also present. Support can acknowledge the feeling without promising absolute certainty. For example: 'I can hear that you're worried. We can work out what you need for the next few minutes.' Individual therapy can help when reassurance-seeking or avoidance is taking over daily life.

Gradual confidence, not forced exposure

Avoiding every situation associated with anxiety can gradually shrink a person's world, but forcing someone into overwhelming situations can also be harmful. A collaborative, gradual approach is usually more useful. Break situations into manageable steps, agree support in advance and let progress be measured by participation and confidence rather than by whether the person managed to hide their tics.

School and work

Anxiety may increase when a person fears discipline, embarrassment, presentations, meetings, exams or customer contact. Adjustments can reduce unnecessary pressure: a quiet space, movement breaks, predictable information, alternative ways to participate, flexible seating or a clear plan for stepping out. Support should enable participation rather than automatically removing the person from opportunities.

When professional support may help

Consider speaking with a GP or appropriate mental-health professional when anxiety is persistent, causing significant avoidance, interfering with sleep, education, work or relationships, or leading to frequent panic. Psychological therapies can help with anxiety, and specialist behavioural therapies can help with troublesome tics where the person wants treatment. Co-occurring conditions such as OCD and ADHD may also need to be considered.

A simple anxiety-and-tics check-in

Notice	Ask yourself
Before	What am I predicting might happen?
Body	Where do I notice tension, urge or anxiety?
Situation	Am I trying to hide or suppress because I feel judged?
Support	What would reduce pressure without removing my choice?
After	What helped me get through it, even if I still ticced?

A message

You are allowed to feel anxious about how other people might respond to your tics. You are also allowed to take up space while ticcing. Progress does not have to mean becoming quieter, stiller or less noticeable. It can mean going somewhere you were afraid to go, asking for an adjustment, allowing a trusted person to support you, or getting through a difficult moment without blaming yourself for what your body did.

UK information and support

NHS information covers Tourette syndrome and anxiety. Tourette's Action provides UK information and resources for people with Tourette syndrome and their families. If anxiety is significantly affecting everyday life, a GP can discuss appropriate mental-health support and referral options.

Sources

NHS: Tourette syndrome; Generalised anxiety disorder and panic information (accessed September 2026). Tourette's Action: Tourette syndrome information and support resources (accessed September 2026). This guide is general information and is not a substitute for individual medical or psychological assessment or treatment.