01 Understanding Anxiety Disorders

A guide for family & loved ones | Understanding anxiety

Anxiety disorders involve fear, worry or physical alarm that can persist, feel hard to control and affect daily life. Experiences vary: generalised anxiety, panic disorder, social anxiety, phobias and other conditions can look very different. Avoid assuming that someone is choosing to worry or can simply switch it off.

What you might notice

Restlessness, muscle tension, poor sleep, stomach discomfort, avoidance, reassurance-seeking, difficulty concentrating or feeling overwhelmed. These signs can have other causes, so listen to the person rather than trying to diagnose them.

Helpful responses

• Listen without rushing to fix the feeling. Try: “Would you like me to listen, help you plan, or sit with you?”

• Validate the experience without confirming feared outcomes. Try: “I can see this feels frightening.”

• Ask what support helps; respect privacy and choices. Agree on a calm time to talk.

• Encourage appropriate professional support when anxiety is persistent, worsening or limiting everyday life.

Reflection: What does anxiety look like for this person, and what have they told me helps?

Signs I have noticed, without judgement:

Questions I could ask instead of making assumptions:

02 Offering Practical Support

Responding with compassion and supporting autonomy

Ask before offering solutions. A small, agreed step may be more useful than repeated reassurance, pressure or taking over. People with anxiety benefit from different approaches; collaborative support should follow their preferences and any treatment plan.

During a difficult moment

• Speak slowly and simply. Reduce noise or demands if the person wants that.

• Offer choices: quiet company, space, a glass of water, or help contacting someone.

• Do not force breathing exercises or exposure. Ask what grounding or coping techniques they already use.

• If a panic episode is suspected, stay calm and supportive; new, severe or unusual physical symptoms may need urgent medical assessment.

Between difficult moments

Agree on predictable check-ins, practical adjustments, shared tasks and realistic expectations. Gradual steps toward feared situations may be helpful when chosen by the person, ideally with guidance from a qualified clinician. Avoid shaming them for setbacks.

Support plan worksheet: complete together only if the person wishes.

When anxiety rises, I can help by…

Things that increase pressure or do not help:

One manageable next step and who can support it:

03 Looking After Yourself Too

Healthy boundaries, shared support and next steps

Supporting someone with anxiety can be emotionally demanding. You can be compassionate without being available at every moment or becoming their only source of support. Your wellbeing matters, and clear boundaries can protect the relationship.

Practical ways to protect your wellbeing

• Agree on what you can realistically offer and when you need rest.

• Keep up with your own routines, friendships and interests.

• Share responsibilities where possible rather than carrying every decision alone.

• Consider speaking to a GP, counsellor or trusted person if your own stress is growing.

• Review plans together regularly; needs and capacity can change.

My support and boundaries worksheet

What I am already doing that is helpful:

One boundary I need, expressed kindly:

People or services I can turn to for support:

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999 (UK). For urgent mental health support in England, contact NHS 111 and select the mental health option. Samaritans: 116 123, free, day or night. This guide is educational and does not replace personalised professional care.