



Let's talk anxiety

Part of the Applied Mental Health Science Series

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What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of emotional unease, tension and restlessness, which usually relates to a worry or fear that something bad is going to happen imminently or in the future.

Anxiety can be helpful at times, enabling us to place a heightened focus on what needs attention, mobilising us to take action designed to keep ourselves safe. However, if experienced frequently or for longer periods, anxiety and the symptoms associated with anxiety can become difficult to manage and may start to interfere with relationships and daily activities.

Feeling anxious is a very natural and understandable response to situations that make us feel under pressure, uncertain or fearful in some way.

Anxiety affects the way we think, feel and behave, and can also lead to physiological changes and sensations in our bodies. Often people will adapt and change their behaviour to avoid feeling anxious or take steps to relieve their anxiety. This might include seeking reassurance from others, avoiding known triggers, information seeking (for example online searches, consulting medical professionals) and leaving situations that feel too anxiety provoking.

While these strategies aim to alleviate anxiety, they often have the reverse effect and keep the cycle of anxiety going. Often, these strategies prevent us from developing the skills we need to manage and face our fears.

Signs and symptoms

Common symptoms of anxiety include:

- Worry and fear about future or past events, accompanied by sense of impending danger
- Indecisiveness and problems thinking clearly,
- Difficulty controlling worry, and concerns about the impact of excessive worry
- Strong physical sensations such as palpitations (fast beating heart), breathlessness, dizziness, chest pain and sweating
- Muscular tension, including headaches, stomach-ache and furrowed brow (frowning)
- Trouble sleeping, and tiredness/fatigue
- Changes in appetite

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, consider reaching out to a qualified medical professional, for example a GP, for help and support.

Due to the nature of anxiety, some of these signs and symptoms be more difficult to spot in others.

Who is affected by anxiety?

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health problems in the world, affecting over 300 million people. 1 in 5 UK adults report feeling anxious most or all of the time, with just over 1 in 3 of women and over 1 in 4 of men reporting high levels of anxiety. Whilst women are reported to be more commonly affected than men, younger women are most affected.



Anxiety is often diagnosed alongside depression, affecting around 8 in 100 people. Anxiety can occur at any age, but usually presents in the mid-teenage years, sometimes later in the 20s and 30s. In the UK, rates of anxiety across different ethnic groups vary, with those in ethnic minorities reporting higher rates than those from a white-British background.



Did you know?

We have other guides in our series on Depression, OCD, PTSD and Perinatal Anxiety and Depression.

What are the common subtypes of anxiety?

While the term 'anxiety' is used to broadly describe a set of common symptoms, you may have heard of other sub-types which share similar characteristics but have a specific focus:

Health anxiety is the excessive concern that you are or will become seriously unwell. Health anxiety affects around 6 in 100 people, however rates are much higher in those with chronic medical problems.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) also affects around 6 in 100 people and is characterised by excessive worry that is pervasive in nature and not limited to one area of concern.

Social anxiety disorder / social phobia is related to fear of being negatively evaluated in social situations (this can include work or personal life) and affects between 5 and 10 in every 100 people.

Simple / specific phobia describes an intense irrational fear of a specific object, this can include living objects, for example snakes. While the term phobia is commonly used to describe specific fears, only around 2 out of 100 people experience phobia that interferes with daily functioning.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterised by obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviours, accompanied by urges to act on unwanted and unpleasant thoughts. OCD often starts in childhood, affecting 2 in every 100 people in the UK.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is experienced following a traumatic event. Affecting around 4 in 100 people, symptoms include nightmares, intrusive thoughts and images and hyperarousal (feeling constantly on edge).

Panic disorder or panic attacks affect around 1 in 100 people and often present with agoraphobia, a fear of crowded or open spaces. Panic attacks usually present suddenly with intense physiological symptoms such as hyperventilation, chest pain and dizziness, accompanied by a fear of an imminent health crisis, for example, a heart attack.

Although these sub-types have their own key characteristics, they often occur together.

How is anxiety diagnosed and treated?

Anxiety can typically be assessed and diagnosed by a GP, using a combination of clinical judgement, nationally recognised criteria and screening questionnaires.

Once diagnosed, a GP may offer a referral for further assessment and treatment in secondary mental health services, or if the case is mild, a GP may offer monitoring and treatment in primary care. They may ask you about your symptoms and how they have been affecting you. They are also likely to ask about how things have been going at home, at work and in your relationships. You may be invited to book an appointment regularly to check how things are going, or urged to get in touch when things become difficult to manage.

The evidence-based treatment and therapy guidelines used in the United Kingdom and the NHS are based on recommendations from the [National Institute for Clinical Excellence \(NICE\)](#).

Psychological therapies, particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are the first-line treatments for anxiety and are widely available in the NHS and private sector. A range of medications such as [selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors \(SSRIs\)](#), are also recommended as a secondary or combined approach, dependent on the severity and impact of anxiety on a person.

Did you know?

Formal diagnosis is usually guided by the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) criteria and questionnaire measures, such as the GAD-7 and PHQ-9.

What does psychological support for anxiety look like?

Psychological therapies aim to reduce psychological distress and improve quality of life.

CBT is a goal directed, time limited therapy that focusses on the here and now, targeting specific thinking and behavioural patterns that contribute to the maintenance of anxiety. A course of CBT usually consists of twelve 50-minute sessions, but this will vary depending on the guidelines. Other recommended therapies include mindfulness-based approaches and applied relaxation.

Psychological therapy can be delivered in an individual, group or self-directed format. Interventions can be delivered face-to-face, over the telephone, and online – which have been found to be about as effective as in person therapy. What format you are offered will depend on the nature of your difficulties and what might be best suited to your specific needs.

We know that friends and family are a strong source of support at difficult times, so building a strong psychological support network is part of maintaining good mental health. Talking about mental health enables us to keep perspective, feel connected and resolve problems together.

Did you know?

In England in 2023-24, there were 1.83 million people referred for NHS Talking Therapies (NHS England Digital, 2025).

To access a talking therapy, in most cases you can either refer yourself or be referred by a GP.

What can you do to support yourself, if you are experiencing anxiety?

If you are experiencing anxiety, you can take a number of simple steps that will help alleviate the symptoms:

Slow your breathing: the physiological symptoms of anxiety can be reversed if you take slow, deep breaths. This is a very simple, but effective strategy, especially if used regularly or as part of a relaxation exercise. Slow breathing gives your brain the message that it is ok to slow down, relax and that you are safe.

Shift your focus: sometimes distracting yourself and focussing on a task or a hobby, can allow you to reset and return to specific worries later, when they can seem more in perspective and manageable.

Get moving: physical movement is helpful on a number of levels. It expends excess adrenaline triggered by anxiety, helps regulate sleep and breathing, and generally contributes to improving your health generally by getting or keeping active.

Talk to someone: by sharing what you are going through, you will foster a connection that will make you feel supported and allow you to gain an alternative or distanced perspective. This may help you to feel more able to tackle what is concerning you.

Breathing exercises are also good for anxiety, and can be done anywhere and by anyone. Find out more on the [NHS Breathing Exercises webpage](#).

While these key steps will prove useful to many, for those who are significantly affected by anxiety on a day-to-day level, the first important step is to recognise this may be a problem worthy of attention and professional help. If anxiety feels unmanageable and overwhelming, it is time to reach out to a GP or someone who has your best interests in mind.

How to support someone with anxiety, with reasonable adjustments

Equality legislation in the UK defines disability as a physical and/or mental health condition that has a substantial and long-term impact on a person's ability to undertake normal daily activities. Under the provisions of the legislation, employers must make reasonable adjustments to ensure that the individual is not disadvantaged at work. They can be changes or adaptations that remove barriers in the workplace.

Have you seen our [‘Let's talk adjustments campaign?’](#)

It aims to raise awareness and empower everyone in veterinary workplaces, no matter their role, disability or health condition, to have important conversations about reasonable adjustments.

It is very likely that someone in your workplace will be struggling with their mental health in a way that substantially affects their life. Here are some ways that you can adjust your workplace to support someone with anxiety:

- Allow for time off during the working day to attend medical appointments (including therapy).
- Create and contribute to a psychologically safe environment, where people feel comfortable to talk about problems and stressful situations can be addressed early.
- Be patient, compassionate and empathetic when interacting with someone with anxiety - hold in mind that everyone struggles with their mental health at some point in their lives.
- Map out what formal and informal support is available in the workplace and make sure this is known to all colleagues.
- If you are their line manager, meet with that person 1:1 on a regular basis to assess and review what reasonable adjustments might be made to ensure they can lead a fulfilling work life where they are able to reach their potential. This might include adjusting hours/working patterns, scheduling regular breaks, providing access to support or more regular check ins. There is no one size fits all when it comes to reasonable adjustments.

There are also a range of employment and education support schemes that can support with reasonable adjustments:

Access to Work

The Access to Work scheme can help you get or stay in work if you have a physical or mental health condition or disability. Access to Work is not means tested, does not need to be paid back and will not impact other benefits you might receive. To find out more visit the [UK Government website](#).

Disabled Students Allowance

Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is a fund that can be applied for, to support university students who are ordinarily resident in the UK, to cover extra disability-related costs or expenses they have while studying (which exceed those provided as reasonable adjustments by their university or college). DSA is not means-tested and does not typically need to be paid back. To find out more visit the [Save the Student website](#) or contact your national student finance organisation.

How to talk to someone experiencing anxiety

Sometimes it can be hard to know how to talk to someone who is struggling with their mental health. You can start by ensuring that when you check in about their wellbeing, that you are present and available to be receptive to their worries and concerns. You could consider asking an open question about how they are/have been, being prepared to listen and sit with their response. They may not be ready to talk, and if not, you can let them know you are there and ready to listen if and when they would like to talk about their wellbeing.

When talking with someone who is struggling with anxiety it is important to:

Show empathy and reassurance: it may have been a difficult first step talking about their feelings, so avoid immediately trying to problem-solve, just listen and validate their concerns as they see them, even if they have concerns you do not share. Be sensitive to the possibility they may also be worried about what you might think or do in response, so it might be helpful to acknowledge how difficult it might have been for them to open-up and talk.

Let them know you are there to support them: ask what you can do to help, be led by them. If it feels appropriate to do so, you might encourage them to keep healthy habits around sleeping, eating and exercise, although be careful not to add pressure.

Know when to access help: if you feel that their anxiety is affecting their ability to enjoy life and is interfering with normal day-to-day activities such as work and relationships, on most days or nearly every day, it may be the right time to suggest seeking professional help.

Take care of yourself: supporting or being around someone with overwhelming anxiety can be emotionally challenging. It is important to recognise the potential impact and take steps to access your own support network, or professional help if needed.

Seeking support

NHS help and support

You can contact a GP for advice, an assessment and referral to local psychological therapies team, or to access medication. In England, Scotland and Wales/Cymru, you can also self-refer to your local NHS Talking Therapies (formerly IAPT) service.

You may also be able to access online CBT programmes such as SilverCloud.

If you need more urgent help and support, you can contact NHS 111 in England, Scotland, and Wales/Cymru, or Lifeline in Northern Ireland on 0808 808 8000 to receive support and advice. If you are deaf or hard of hearing, you can also find useful advice from the [RNID](#) on using the confidential relay service Relay UK, to contact NHS 111 and Lifeline.

You can also contact a GP surgery and ask for an emergency appointment.

If you are in crisis or need immediate medical help call 999 and ask for an ambulance or visit your local A&E department.

General support

- **Anxiety UK Self-care infoline** – available 24/7 and offers access to a range of relaxation and self-care exercises. Call 03444 775 774.
- **Vetlife Helpline** – available 24/7 to listen and offer a confidential, safe, and non-judgmental space. Call 0303 040 2551 or visit the [Vetlife website](#) to register and contact anonymously via email.
- **Samaritans** – available 24/7 and provides a safe place for anyone, whatever you are going through. Call 116 123 or email: jo@samaritans.org
- **Shout** – available 24/7 and offers a free, confidential text messaging service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Text SHOUT to 85258.

There are also resources and information provided by [Mind](#) and [Anxiety UK](#).

If you would like a list of research and resources that have been used/referred to in this guide, please contact info@vetmindmatters.org

About this guide

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The guide has been developed by Dr Jo Daniels, Clinical Psychologist, in partnership with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) Mind Matters Initiative (MMI).

'Clinical psychologists deal with a wide range of mental and physical health problems including addiction, anxiety, depression, learning difficulties and relationship issues' (British Psychological Society, 2025).

Please note that our health information should not be used for diagnosis purposes. If you are concerned about your health, please seek help from a GP or a mental health professional.

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How to feed back and contact RCVS Mind Matters

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, we welcome feedback and suggestions for future updates to this guide.

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Did you know?

Clinical psychologists are protected titles by law and individuals must be registered with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) to practise. [You can check if someone is registered on the HCPC website.](#)

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