



West Lothian
Community Wellbeing Hub

Anxiety

Booklet 1 – What is anxiety?



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What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the body's way of responding to being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight.

This happens whether the danger is real, or whether we believe the danger is there when actually there is none. It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism.

Primitive man wouldn't have survived for long without this life-saving response. It works so well, that it often kicks in when it's not needed - when the danger is in our heads rather than in reality. We think we're in danger and that's enough to trigger the system to go.

People who get anxious tend to go into scanning mode - where they're constantly on the lookout for danger and hyper-alert to any of the signals. This makes it more likely that the alarm system will be activated.

Common types of anxiety include:

- **Generalised anxiety:** An excessive amount of anxiety or worry in several areas of life, such as: job, responsibilities, health, finances, or minor concerns (e.g. completing housework).
- **Phobias:** A very intense fear of a specific situation or object, which is out of proportion to its actual threat. For example, a fear of giving speeches or of spiders could be considered a phobia.
- **Panic:** An extreme anxious response where a person experiences a panic attack. During a panic attack, the individual experiences numerous physical symptoms and is overwhelmed by a feeling of dread.

When anxiety becomes unhelpful...

In small doses, anxiety is helpful. It protects us from danger and focuses our attention on problems. But when anxiety is too severe, or occurs too frequently, it can become debilitating.

Symptoms of anxiety, whilst not dangerous can be uncomfortable. Symptoms can also be frightening- particularly if someone does not know these symptoms are just signs of anxiety.

Sometimes people with anxiety symptoms worry that they may have something seriously wrong with them. This worry can then produce more anxiety symptoms which of course increases the worry.

When anxiety is severe it can stop people doing what they want to do.

Anxiety drives people to avoid the things that scare them. When a “scary” thing is avoided, there is an immediate but short-lived sense of relief. However, the next time a similar threat arises, it feels even scarier. This creates a harmful cycle of avoidance, worsening anxiety. This is discussed in more detail later in the booklet.

If anxiety goes on for a long time it can sometimes make physical problems worse, such as stomach problems and high blood pressure.

Fight or flight

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The fight or flight response is an automatic survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions.

All the body sensations produced are happening for a good reason – to prepare the body for fight or flight- but may be uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.

- **Racing thoughts** - quicker thinking helps us to evaluate danger and make rapid decisions. It can be difficult to concentrate on anything.
- **Dizzy or lightheaded**- if we don't use up the extra oxygen being produced, then we can quickly start to feel dizzy or light-headed.
- **Changes to vision**- so that more attention can be paid to danger. You might notice 'tunnel vision' or vision becoming 'sharper'
- **Dry mouth**- the mouth is part of the digestive system which shuts down in dangerous situations as energy is diverted towards muscles.
- **Breathing becomes quicker**- quicker breathing takes in more oxygen to power the muscles.
- **Heart beats faster**- a faster heartbeat feeds more blood to the muscles and enhances your ability to run away or fight
- **Adrenal glands release adrenaline**- the adrenaline quickly signals other parts of the body to get ready to respond to danger.
- **Nausea and 'butterflies' in the stomach**- Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea
- **Bladder urgency**- muscles in the bladder sometimes relax in response to extreme stress.
- **Palms become sweaty**- when in danger the body sweats to keep cool.
- **Hands get cold**- blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups.
- **Muscles get tense**- muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble as a way of staying 'ready for action'

Anxious thoughts

- Constant worrying
- Can't concentrate
- Racing thoughts
- Mind jumping from one thing to another
- Imagining the worst and dwelling on it
- Going over the same worries again and again.

Anxious feelings

- Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened
- Feeling something dreadful is going to happen
- Tense, stressed, uptight, on edge, unsettled
- Unreal, strange, woozy, detached, panicky.

Anxious physical sensations

- Heart pounds, races, skips a beat
- Chest feels tight or painful
- Tingling or numbness in toes or fingers
- Stomach churning or butterflies
- Having to go to the toilet
- Feeling restless or jumpy
- Tense muscles
- Body aching
- Sweating
- Breathing changes
- Dizzy, light-headed.

Anxious behaviours

- Pace up and down
- Start jobs and not finish them
- Can't sit still and relax
- On the go all of the time
- Talk quickly or more than usual
- Snappy and irritable
- Drink more alcohol
- Smoke more
- Eat more (or less)
- Avoid feared situations
- Only going places with other people
- Going places at certain times.

Causes of anxiety

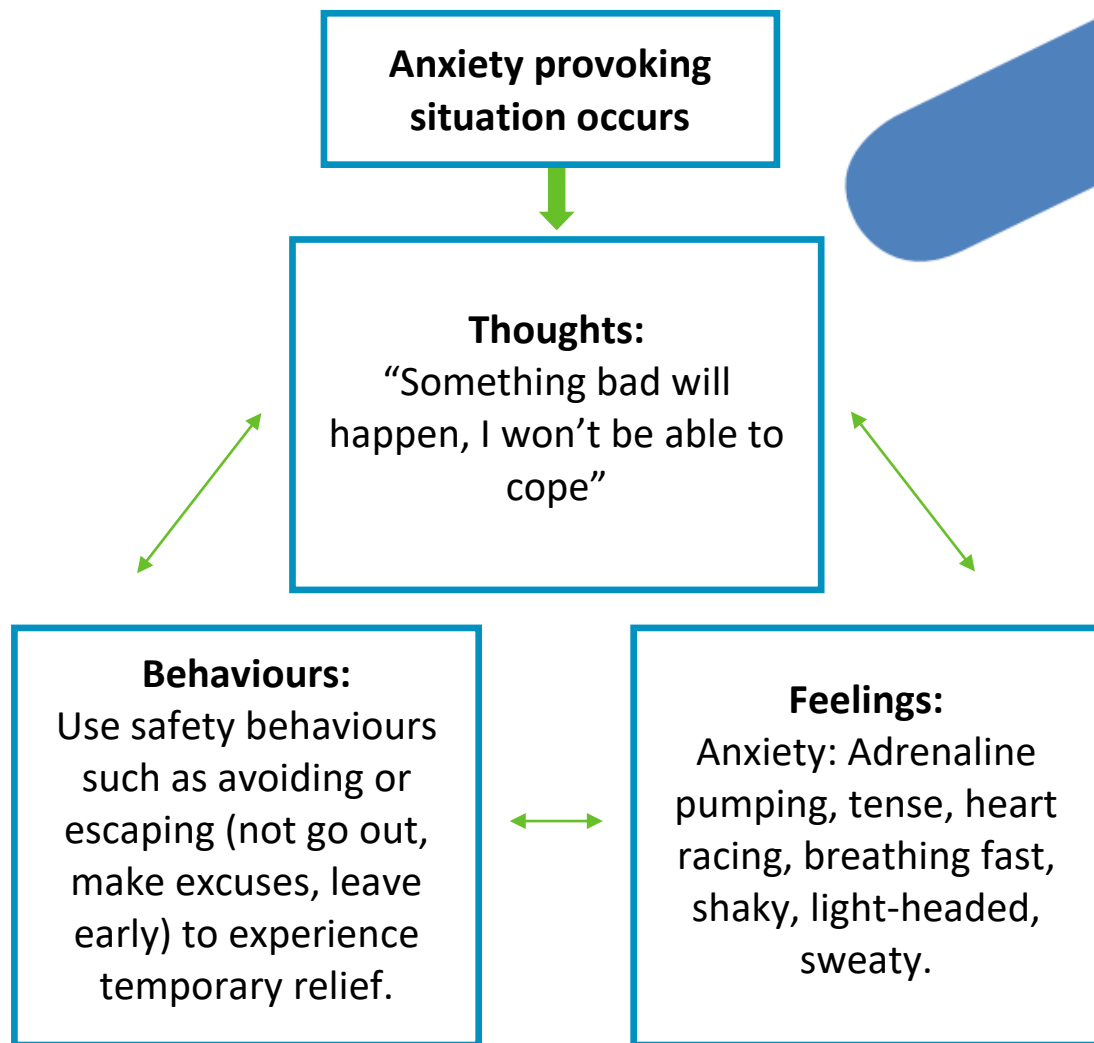
Anxiety is a very common problem with at least 1 in 4 people having high anxiety levels at some point in their life.

There may be many causes of anxiety:

- Some people may have an anxious personality and have learned to worry
- Some may have had early experiences that make them feel anxious and insecure
- Others may have had a series of stressful life events to cope with, for example: bereavements, redundancy, divorce, or illness
- Others may feel under pressure at work, for example: working long hours or feeling understaffed
- Some may feel pressure at home for example: because of financial, family, or relationship problems.

A physical health problem, misuse of substances, or a history of depression are also known to affect anxiety (please consult your doctor if you think any of these apply to you).

Vicious cycle of anxiety



Safety behaviours can also help to keep your anxiety going. Whilst you depend on them to help you cope, you don't get to find out that without them, the anxiety would reduce and go away on its own.

Whilst avoiding people or situations might help you feel better at that time, it doesn't make your anxiety any better over a longer period. If you're frightened that your anxiety will make you pass out or vomit in the supermarket aisle, you won't find out that won't actually happen, because you don't go. So, the belief that it will happen remains, along with the anxiety.

Activity 1: Recognising your anxiety

What are three things that trigger your anxiety?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three physical symptoms that you experience when you feel anxious?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three thoughts you tend to have when you feel anxious?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three things that you avoid when you are anxious?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are three things that are currently adding to your stress levels?

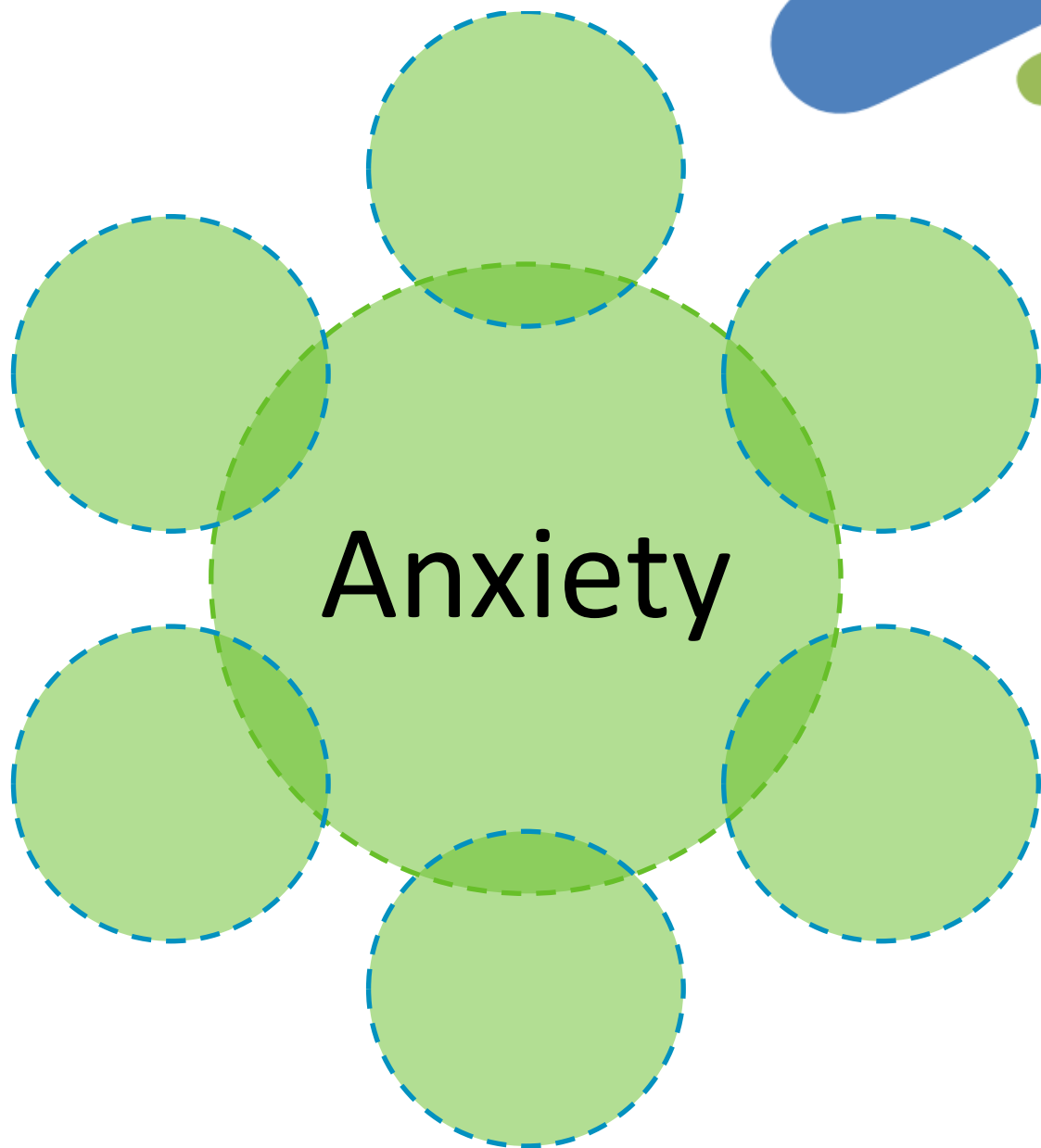
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Activity 2: The cogs of your anxiety

By looking at the "cogs" that keep the central problem going, we can target and make positive changes in each of the cogs, which will at least slow down and at best stop, the central problem. For example:



Have a go at filling out the factors that keep your anxiety going:



This booklet was created for the West Lothian Community Wellbeing Hubs, it is an adaption of the below resources:

- **NHS Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Anxiety, An NHS Self Help Guide:**
<https://web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Anxiety.pdf>
- **Therapist Aid – Introduction to Anxiety:**
www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/introduction-to-anxiety
- **Therapist Aid – What is Anxiety?:**
www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/what-is-anxiety
- **Get Self Help – Anxiety:**
www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/AnxietySelfHelp.pdf



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V1.0 approved by NHS Lothian Patient Information Team, Feb 2022
Review date, Feb 2025. LOT2346