

YOUR HEALTH

ANXIETY MANAGEMENT



Anxiety and stress can affect quality of life and can at times become overwhelming and difficult to manage. Anxiety and panic attacks can accompany certain symptoms like breathlessness and can also exacerbate others i.e. fatigue and pain. It can lead to avoiding certain activities or, in severe cases affect quality of life. It may have a considerable impact on your life and general wellbeing.

The aim of this leaflet is to provide information and advice for the management of stress and anxiety with tips, tools and techniques that may help. Advice regarding sleep difficulties is also covered. This leaflet can also be accompanied by the 'Breathlessness management' and 'Living with breathlessness and fatigue' leaflets.

Stress & Anxiety

When you have been diagnosed with a serious illness, or are caring for someone in this situation, it is natural to worry about what will happen.

Sometimes the worry can be very intense, and more like fear or anxiety. These are normal reactions to stressful situations.

What is anxiety?

When we are faced with a frightening situation our brain sets off an automatic chain of events called the fight or flight response. This prepares our body to either fight or run away in a dangerous situation. This can happen whether or not the danger is real or imagined e.g. fear of all dogs whether they are genuinely dangerous or not.

A hormone called adrenaline is released into the blood stream which causes a number of physical responses or sensations.

Your heart rate may increase to pump more blood to the muscles, breathing becomes more rapid as the muscles require more oxygen, and blood is diverted from less essential areas like the gut which can cause 'butterflies'.

If you are constantly subjected to stress you may feel anxious over a prolonged period of time and find it difficult to manage your bodily sensations or anxious thoughts.

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When someone feels anxious they will often experience negative thoughts. These will usually predict that the worst is about to happen. This is called catastrophic thinking.

It is possible to induce feelings of anxiety and panic simply by thinking about a danger.

Anxiety may cause us to act or behave in a certain way. The most common behaviour that we show when anxious is avoidance, i.e. avoiding what has caused the anxiety.

If you are very anxious you may have a panic attack, in which the fear and anxiety is overwhelming and you may feel very breathless with a pounding heart, sweating and shaking. This can happen to anyone and can be accompanied with a feeling that death is imminent.

Managing Stress & Anxiety

Breathing Exercises

Practicing breathing exercises may help you to feel more relaxed (see the 'Breathlessness management leaflet'). Examples are:

- Relaxed abdominal breathing or diaphragmatic breathing
- Catching your breath – deliberately taking a breath in or out to address possible breath holding in anxious situation
- The Breathing Rectangle

The Calming hand technique

Place your hand in your lap or on the arm of a chair with palm facing upwards.

1. Thumb: Recognise the signs of panic and the need to use the calming hand.
2. Index Finger – Breathe / Sigh out: This will help relax your neck and shoulders by letting these muscles relax, breathing out as you do so.
3. Middle Finger: Take a relaxed breath in.
4. Ring Finger: Relaxed breath out.
5. Little Finger: Contract and relax hand either by stretching or making a fist.

Repeat this cycle as many times as required until you feel more in control.



Talking

Talking to others about anything that is worrying you can help to reduce anxiety.

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Distraction

Try distraction techniques such as reading, seeing friends, and listening to music, to take your mind away from worrying thoughts. These are called stress relievers

Light Exercise & Activity

Engage in light exercise if you can, such as walking.

Complementary Therapies

Complementary therapies such as massage can help to relax you and give a feeling of wellbeing

Relaxation

A technique that aims to reduce physical tension in the body that has built up as a result of anxiety.

A simple relaxation technique

We hold tension in the muscles of our bodies which uses up valuable energy and resources and can actually be contributory to certain symptom related problems such as fatigue, breathlessness and pain.

Learning to relax

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Preparing to Relax

Before doing a relaxation exercise it is important to prepare.

You may want to consider the following:

- Silencing the telephone.
- Finding or creating a quiet and restful place in your home.
- Dimming any bright lights.
- Loosening any tight clothing.
- Playing some relaxing, soothing music or a CD with relaxing sounds like waves on the beach or whale song.
- Finding a comfortable position that provides support for your shoulders, neck and back - use a pillow or cushion if this helps.
- Placing your hands comfortably by your sides or relaxed in your lap.
- Closing your eyes

How to do a simple relaxation technique

Start by using a relaxed abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing technique (see the Breathlessness management leaflet).

- Breathe in and out gently
- Try to imagine a balloon gently filling with air and then slowly deflating as you breathe in and breathe out
- Continue to do this a few times until you begin to feel more calm and relaxed
- You can either start with your head and work downwards or your feet and work upwards

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- Focus on each muscle group (feet and legs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, arms and hands, neck, shoulders and face) and voluntarily relax those muscles or tense the muscles and then relax or 'let them go/flop' and experience the difference between tension and relaxation.
- The muscles where the most tension can be held are the jaw muscles, neck muscles, shoulder muscles and abdominal area, so pay particular attention to these.
- Finish the technique by relaxing quietly, enjoying the experience before slowly moving again. Be careful on standing up afterwards and do so slowly as your blood pressure may have lowered.
- You can find a wellbeing relaxation technique on our St Helena Hospice YouTube channel

Emergency Stop Technique

This technique is about stopping an anxious feeling or unpleasant thought the moment it enters your head.

Say STOP loudly to yourself as soon as an anxious thought enters your head. Visualise a flashing red STOP sign appearing.

Difficulties Sleeping

Sleep is frequently a problem when you are experiencing worry and anxiety. You may have a symptom which disturbs your sleep.

In the case of fatigue you may also find that sleeping does not alleviate the feeling of tiredness.

Common difficulties that people have are sleeping too much, difficulty falling asleep, or broken sleep. As a result sleep patterns can become disrupted.

Managing Stress & Anxiety

What affects sleep?

- Being inactive during the day can lead to increased feelings of tiredness coupled with the inability to get to sleep at night
- Naps and sleeping for prolonged periods of time during the day
- Anxiety and worry
- Discomfort in bed

Coping Strategies

- Establish a routine - get up at the same time each day irrespective of what time you got to sleep.
- If you are sleeping long into the day, gradually cut back and don't compensate by going to bed earlier.
- Prepare for sleep - do not go to bed unless you are sleepy.

Start winding down an hour before you go to bed and avoid activities that keep you alert; instead, include activities that promote relaxation such as light reading, taking a warm bath, listening to music etc.

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- Avoid watching television or looking at a computer screen, as it can stimulate the brain - consider recording late television programmes and watch them at an earlier time of the day if possible.
- See if your smart device has a night mode or plan to switch devices off as part of your wind down routine.
- Avoid stimulants such as coffee or tea four to six hours before going to bed and avoid excessive alcohol before bed.
- Create a healthy sleep environment – make sure that your bed/bedroom becomes associated with sleep.
- If you are unable to sleep, don't lie there.
- Get up and do something that will occupy you, preferably in another room until you start to feel drowsy.
- Reduce worry at night – try not to worry that you have not gone to sleep. Lying in bed relaxing may still refresh you.
- If you are worrying about things, try to write these down on a piece of paper and attend to them in the morning or at a set time during the day.
- Know how naps affect you. Some people find that daytime naps help them sleep better at night, while others sleep less well after them. Find out which best suits you.
- GP or Hospice Key Worker.
- You may be prescribed sleeping tablets that may help you to establish a regular sleep pattern but this is less common.

Basic Advice

If you continue with anxiety and worry consider a referral for counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Ask your keyworker for more advice.

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts then please speak to your keyworker or GP surgery.