

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, even getting out of the house, and therefore can 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 booklet can also be accompanied by the 'Breathlessness management' and 'Living with breathlessness and fatigue' leaflets.

Stress and 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. However these feelings get easier to manage as you come to terms with what has happened.

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 concerns our body getting prepared 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.

When someone feels anxious they will often experience negative thoughts. These will usually predict that the worst is about to happen. It is possible to induce feelings of anxiety and panic simply by thinking about something.

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 and anxiety

Breathing exercises

Practicing breathing exercises may help you to feel more relaxed. Examples are:

- Relaxed abdominal breathing or diaphragmatic breathing.
- Catching your breath – deliberately taking a breath in as many people find they hold their breath in anxious situations.

Talking

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

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 or 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

This is 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

A useful technique can be Progressive Muscle Relaxation or PMR which involves voluntarily relaxing certain muscles done as a

pleasant relaxation exercise or by contracting and relaxing muscles.

Ideally relaxation needs to be practiced daily for at least 10 to 20 minutes to be most effective.

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 - but don't be concerned if you would rather not.

How to do a simple relaxation technique

Start by using a relaxed abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing technique. Please ask your healthcare professional if you are not sure what this is.

- 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.
- Focus on each muscle group (feet and hands, lower and upper legs and arms,

buttocks, abdomen, chest, shoulders, neck and face) and voluntarily relax those muscles or tense the muscles and then relax or 'let them go' and experience the difference between tension and relaxation.

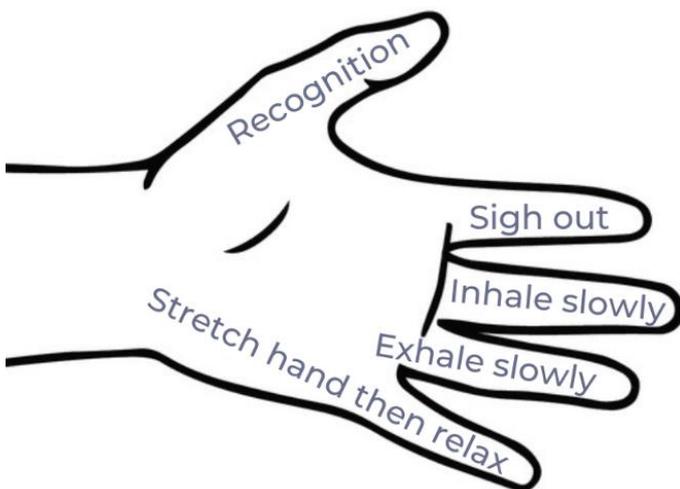
- The muscles where the most tension can be held are the jaw muscles, neck muscles, shoulder muscles and abdominal area, so pay particular attention to these.
- Finish the technique by relaxing quietly, enjoying the experience before slowly moving again. Be careful on standing up afterwards and do so slowly.

Panic hand technique

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

1. Recognise the signs of panic and the need to use the panic hand.
2. Sigh out: This will help relax your neck and shoulders by letting these muscles relax, breathing out as you do so.
3. Take a relaxed breath in.
4. Breathe out.
5. Contract and relax hand.

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



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 fatigue, 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.

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.
- Avoid watching television or looking at a computer screen, as it can stimulate the

