

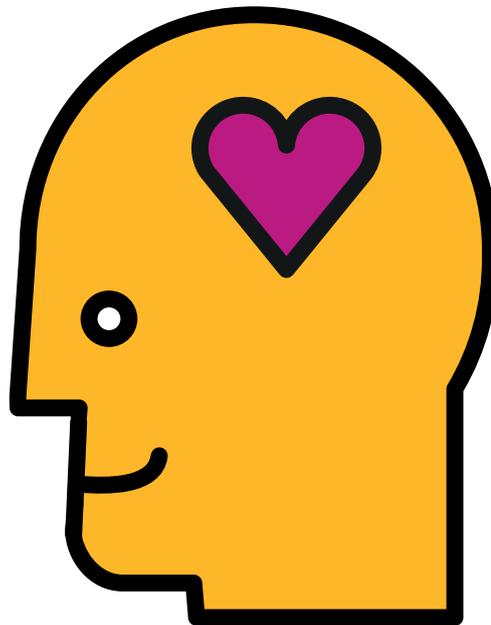
# Understanding anxiety



## Workbook

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## About this workbook

Welcome to our '**Understanding anxiety**' workbook.

We understand that anxiety can be a common problem at the best of times, without the additional worry of COVID-19.

We want you to know that it is natural to struggle during this period. Whatever you're feeling, it is a normal response in abnormal circumstances.

To help you through this challenging time, we have worked with our colleagues, learners and volunteers, to produce a range of wellbeing workbooks that you can access independently or with support.

The aim of this workbook is to increase your understanding of anxiety and to share helpful self-management strategies from people that experience anxiety and live well, despite it. We hope this makes you feel less alone in your experiences.

Throughout this workbook, there will be exercises for you to have a go at, if you think they might be helpful. Look out for this symbol



We also understand that getting started with exercises can sometimes be difficult; especially if you're completing this workbook without support.

That's why we've included this symbol  which provides example answers from people who understand what it's like to live with anxiety.

We hope that our workbooks are helpful and that you enjoy using them!

Best wishes,  
**The Exchange, Recovery College Barnsley**

## Learning outcomes

By completing this workbook you will be able to:

- Define what anxiety means to you
- Identify and list the physical sensations of anxiety
- Recognise two different types of worry
- Identify examples of safety behaviours
- List coping strategies and identify one new strategy to try

## Understanding anxiety

 *Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Anxiety is a natural human response when we perceive that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.* 

(Mind, 2019)

Anxiety is something that everyone experiences from time to time. Anxiety only becomes a problem when it occurs too frequently and interferes with our everyday lives and relationships.

Now that we have given you a definition of anxiety, have a go at describing what anxiety means to you. For example answers, check out the speech bubble symbol below.



### Exercise: Define what anxiety means to you

Type here, write or draw!



### Example answers from people experiencing anxiety:

"The feeling that I want to run away and hide"

"A feeling of dread, like something bad will happen"

"It's totally debilitating"

"It makes me scared, I can't socialise"

"Not going out. Isolating myself"

"My legs feel like jelly"

"Constant worrying. My head doesn't switch off"

"Expecting the worst case scenario no matter what"

## Physical sensations of anxiety

When we feel under threat, our bodies react by releasing hormones called adrenaline and cortisol. This is an automatic response that happens whether the threat is real or imagined. These hormones make us feel alert, so that we can act quickly in the face of danger. Our heart beats faster to make the blood flow to our arms and legs. This is to ensure that we are able to fight or flee. This is commonly known as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response. After the threat has passed, our bodies then release other hormones to help our muscles relax. This can sometimes cause our body to shake.

When you feel stressed or anxious, what physical sensations do you notice in your body? Write or draw what you experience in the box below.



**Exercise:** List the physical sensations that you experience



**Example answers from people experiencing anxiety:**

"I shake"

"My legs go like jelly, I feel like they're going to go from beneath me!"

"Heart races"

"My stomach churns"

"My muscles and jaw becomes tense"

"I sweat"

"I feel myself going really hot and flushed"

"I get a dry mouth and my eyes feel really wide"  
I go dizzy and lightheaded"

"My breathing gets fast"

"Butterflies in tummy"

## Understanding worry

When we experience anxiety, worrying about the worst case scenario can become a habit. Overthinking can lead to our fears becoming magnified, which only leads to further anxiety. See the cycle?

Everyone worries to some degree and thinking ahead about some things can help us to plan and to cope. However, if worry is stopping you from living the life that you want to live, then it's problematic. There are two types of worries. Let's see which one you identify with most!

### Real problem worries

Are situations that are affecting you now, and whilst they're not easy or always pleasant to solve, there might be some form of action that you can take to reduce the worry and anxiety that you feel. If we respond to real problem worries with a problem solving attitude, it encourages us to maintain a degree of control, through exploring the choices and options available to us.

For example: My financial situation has changed and I can't afford my bills.  
Option to reduce worry; I could contact my bank and bill suppliers to explain and negotiate payments.

### Hypothetical worries

Are things that don't currently exist but might happen in the future. This involves worrying about unlikely or future events and asking yourself lots of "what if..." questions.  
For example; What if I lost my job? What if I couldn't find another job? What if I end up homeless? What if my partner leaves me? What if I can't cope?

Hypothetical worries take a lot of emotional energy and keep the cogs of anxiety turning, without much resolve.

How does this relate to your experience of worry? Have a go at answering this question in the text box provided below. There are no right or wrong answers, only opportunities to make greater sense of yourself; and we hope these questions help with that.



**Exercise:** How does this relate to your experience of worry?



**Exercise:** Have a go at writing down all of your worries. Now take a highlighter, and identify only the real problem worries.



**Exercise:** What has this exercise revealed to you? Use this box to reflect on your findings.

## The cogs that keep anxiety turning

Anxiety is largely fuelled by what we think. By no means does this suggest that you must only think happy thoughts. Let's face it; anxiety is a natural and 'normal' response to fear. No one is exempt! But what is important is how we **choose to think** about our situation and circumstances. Because, how we think about something, shapes how we feel about it and therefore what we do (our behaviour). It's a domino effect...

For example; if you were to think "something bad is going to happen", and your heart starts to race and your muscles become tense, what are you likely to do next?



**Exercise:** Provide an example of what behaviour we might see, after having this anxious thought



**Example answers from people experiencing anxiety:**

"I'd avoid people and places"

"I'd only go out at certain times"

"I'd only go out if I'm with someone I know and trust, so I feel safe"

"I wouldn't go out at all. I'd isolate myself"

"I'd start to make excuses to get out of situations".

All of these examples are called safety behaviours. Whilst using safety behaviours might help you to feel better in the short term, it doesn't improve anxiety long term. This is because you never get to test out if what you fear may happen, doesn't actually happen or isn't as bad as you thought. So the belief remains, along with anxiety.

## Advice from people living well with anxiety

Reframing and challenging my thoughts really helps, even though I have to push myself to do it. I always feel better afterwards so that helps to motivate me! I do this by "taking my thoughts to court". I ask myself, would these thoughts stand up in a court of law? Where's my evidence?! This helps me to rationalise what's going on and to reduce anxiety.

One of the things I can recommend is to concentrate on your breathing and slow it down. This will really help with any anxiety that you have. I know it's hard sometimes to see the good things around us, but nature is thriving and is very calming, the sky is the bluest I've ever seen and wildlife is returning to areas not known before. Anxiety is a normal emotion, so don't beat yourself up for feeling it.

If anxious thoughts are running through my head, it really helps to write them down. This helps me to sleep better too, because I'm able to identify if there's a real problem amongst those worries that I can do something about. If I can't, I try my best to practice living in the now rather than in the future or the past. Walking in nature and yoga also helps to calm and inspire me.

I cope with anxiety by doing meditation every day. I have also started to knit and practice creative writing. This really helps me to lose myself in a little world. I also like to use my Himalayan salt lamp and fairy lights to relax, with the addition of my lavender candle and drinking a hot chocolate. Listening to relaxing music really helps me too.

# Coping strategies

What strategies have helped you to live well with anxiety? If this question is difficult to answer, this is a great opportunity to find out and try something new. For help or inspiration, don't forget to refer to the examples below or the additional resources section



**Exercise:** List the strategies that are helpful to you and identify one new strategy to try



**Example answers from people experiencing anxiety:**

"Setting goals"

"Delegating tasks to reduce the pressure I'm under"

"Having a plan. Looking at what's in my control and what I can do about it"

"Art"

"Taking a hot bath"

"Lighting my candles"

"Listening to music"

"Going back to basics. Making sure I sleep and eat well"

"Writing down my thoughts and feelings"

"Reading"

"Going for a run"

"Talking to a friend or close family"

"Yoga by Adrienne on YouTube – she's great and it's free!"

**Thank you for completing this workbook**

## Additional resources

If you feel that your health and wellbeing would benefit from the contribution of outside help, the following resources have been provided for you to explore at your own leisure.

### Anxiety UK

Tel: 03444 775 774

Text: 07537 416 905

Website: [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

### IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies)

Information about local NHS therapy and counselling services, which you can often self-refer to.

Website: [nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service](http://nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-psychological-therapies-service)

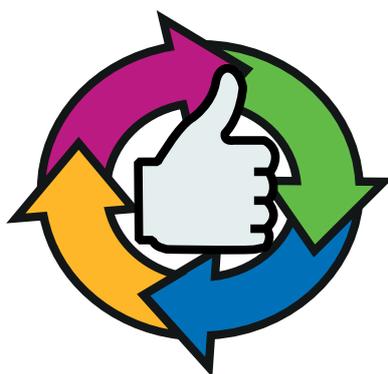
### The Samaritans

24-hour emotional support for anyone who needs to talk

Tel: 116 123

Website: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

- To learn more about The Exchange Recovery College get in touch by telephone on 01226 730433 or email [Barnsley.Recoverycollege@swyt.nhs.uk](mailto:Barnsley.Recoverycollege@swyt.nhs.uk)
- If you would like to tell us about your experience of this workbook or have any enquiries please contact [lisa.hart@swyt.nhs.uk](mailto:lisa.hart@swyt.nhs.uk)
- If you would like to build on the learning taken from this workbook, The Exchange Recovery College provides a course entitled 'Feel the Fear. For further information please contact the college.
- Where you feel that you require further help for your physical and or emotional health, please contact your GP in the first instance, who can refer you to the appropriate services where required.



# Notes



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