



MANAGING  
ANXIETY AND  
PANIC ATTACKS

# MANAGING ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a normal and essential part of all our lives. Anxiety can motivate achievement, push us to run faster in a race, to compete and to think more quickly in an exam. Anxiety also mobilises us to deal with threatening situations. It is not possible or even helpful to eliminate anxiety and worry from our lives. Life would be dull and dangerous without it.

When we feel unsafe or uncomfortable, we experience heightened arousal, alertness and physical tension.

ANXIETY IS A  
PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO A PERCEIVED  
THREAT OR DANGER.

'ANXIETY IS A NORMAL AND ESSENTIAL  
PART OF ALL OUR LIVES...'

## SYMPTOMS

### SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY MAY INCLUDE:

- Tense muscles, discomfort, unease, fidgeting, restlessness, tics, twitching, trembling
- Headaches
- Irritability, aggression, anger
- Mind racing with worrying thoughts
- Sleep disturbance, disturbing dreams
- Breathlessness, over-breathing
- Sweating, flushing, blushing
- Palpitations, racing heartbeat
- Needing frequent trips to the toilet
- Nausea, light-headedness
- A sense of depersonalisation, unreality
- A desire to avoid or get away from the situation.

# MANAGING ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

## WE MAY START TO RESTRICT OUR LIVES IN AN ATTEMPT TO AVOID POTENTIALLY UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATIONS.

Anxious thoughts disrupt our concentration and we may feel overwhelmed particularly when we are under pressure to perform.

Some people cling to friends and constantly seek reassurance when they feel anxious; others withdraw and become isolated. These responses can be difficult for those around us to understand. Sometimes we may not even recognise that we are anxious and may attribute these symptoms to other causes.

## ANXIETY IS VERY COMMON.

9% of the general population were identified as suffering from a clearly identified anxiety disorder in the 1995 OPCS Household Survey and generally there are raised levels of anxiety among students around exams and coursework deadlines.

If anxious thoughts and feelings become particularly intense, messages to the brain can trigger a chain of automatic physiological reactions, which prepare us to fight, run away or hide from danger. This is known as the *fight, flight or freeze* response. Unfortunately these physiological responses are not helpful when we are sitting in an exam room, socialising or about to do a presentation.

If the *fight/flight/freeze* response is triggered when there is no actual danger to act upon, this may lead to a panic attack.

## PANIC ATTACKS

### DURING A PANIC ATTACK:

- breathing becomes faster causing hyperventilation
- an excess of oxygen is inhaled, making us feel light-headed and faint
- the heart beats faster, pumping blood to the muscles in preparation for action and producing a tingling sensation in hands and feet
- sweating increases
- the body lightens the load for action by emptying the bladder and bowels
- the urge to get out of the situation as quickly as possible becomes overwhelming
- you may respond angrily if anything gets in our way.

THESE SYMPTOMS CAN BE FRIGHTENING AND BIZARRE AND PEOPLE OFTEN FEAR THEY ARE HAVING A HEART ATTACK OR GOING MAD. IN REALITY, THIS IS A NORMAL HEALTHY PROTECTIVE MECHANISM THAT IS BEING SWITCHED ON AT THE WRONG TIME.

## WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?

If we interpret a situation or event as a threat to our emotional or physical well being, then we will experience anxiety. These anxieties generally stem from some underlying fear of failure or of being rejected. Worry and anxiety can become a habit that is hard to break and we may become anxious about feeling anxious.

## IF OUR GENERAL LEVEL OF ANXIETY BECOMES CONSTANTLY RAISED, OUR ALARM SYSTEM MAY TRIGGER MORE FREQUENT PANIC ATTACKS.

On the other hand, some people enjoy exams and large social gatherings; some people like spiders and even pay to go bungee jumping. It is not the situation itself, but the way we think about it that makes us feel anxious or worried. This gives us a useful clue to learning to control our anxiety. It is therefore useful to focus on why your mind is working in the way it is rather than just getting caught up in the thing that is worrying you.

'...IT'S NOT THE SITUATION ITSELF, BUT THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT IT THAT MAKES US FEEL ANXIOUS OR WORRIED.'

- Accepting a degree of anxiety as normal, functional and harmless will reduce your fears and help you to regain control. Talking to your GP or a counsellor and finding out more information can help. Some self-help books are listed at the end of this leaflet.
- If you experience raised levels of anxiety most of the time, find out what helps you to wind down. Set time aside to relax on a regular basis.
- Regular exercise, such as walking or swimming, boosts serotonin levels and increases your sense of wellbeing. If you are feeling anxious, a short, brisk walk is likely to help.
- If you tend to be a worrier or if something is troubling you, find someone to discuss it with. A different perspective can help you get out of the loop your mind is in.
- Understanding what triggers your anxiety may help you to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts and to develop problem-solving strategies.
- If you are avoiding a situation where you feel particularly anxious, you may consider developing a plan to desensitise yourself to this, step by step, perhaps with the support of a friend.
- Medication may help in coping with a crisis or reduce intense anxiety to allow you to develop some coping strategies. See your GP if you think this might help.

## ACCEPTING A DEGREE OF ANXIETY AS NORMAL, FUNCTIONAL AND HARMLESS WILL REDUCE YOUR FEARS AND HELP YOU TO REGAIN CONTROL.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

- Try to resist the temptation to cope with anxiety by using alcohol, drugs or tobacco. These may provide temporary relief but they do not resolve the problem and are likely to make things worse. Drugs that depress the central nervous system, such as alcohol, have a rebound effect as they wear off and result in jittery feelings and more anxiety.
- Cut out or reduce stimulants such as coffee, tea and drinks that contain caffeine and sugar. Stimulant drugs such as amphetamines, tobacco and ecstasy, cause side effects similar to anxiety.
- If we start to panic, our thoughts and feelings feed the fear. We can prolong or shorten a panic attack by what we think and the things we say to ourselves. By understanding that a panic attack is normal, though unpleasant, we can reassure and calm ourselves.
- Breathing quickly and taking in excess oxygen creates unpleasant symptoms. Slowing down your breathing and not taking big gulps of air will help immediately.
- Cupping your hands over nose and mouth as you breathe will also help to restore the oxygen/carbon dioxide balance and will have a calming effect.
- If you are having difficulties with your studies or exams, speak to your personal or senior tutor or a member of staff in your School to let them know.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

- There are many people in the University to whom you can turn to for support. Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your personal or senior tutor, or a member of staff in your School. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary. You may prefer to approach the Counselling Service or the Student Union.
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, talk to your personal tutor or a member of staff in your School so that they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams.
- There are specialist organisations providing advice, information and support and you can find their details on the internet and from the Counselling Service webpage, [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

'...THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE  
IN THE UNIVERSITY TO WHOM  
YOU CAN TURN TO FOR SUPPORT.'



## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- If you think a friend, or someone you know, may be suffering from anxiety, you can offer support and a listening ear.
- Encourage them to balance work and relaxation and to take breaks.
- Do not encourage them to use alcohol or drugs to relax or forget their problems. These may bring temporary relief, but they will not resolve the problem and may make it worse.
- There are limits to what you can do and you need to take care of yourself. Sometimes demands for constant reassurance may become exhausting for you, particularly when you might be struggling with coursework and exams. If you are concerned about someone, encourage them to seek help.

'.....IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT SOMEONE,  
ENCOURAGE THEM TO SEEK HELP.'

## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

### SOMETIMES, SELF-HELP COMBINED WITH PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY MAY ENABLE YOU TO MANAGE YOUR ANXIETY.

If, however, you feel anxious or uncomfortable talking about personal issues with those around you, or if you feel too overwhelmed by anxiety to take the first steps to regaining control, there is help available at the university. You may prefer to approach someone you know, your personal or senior tutor or another member of staff.

#### **Depending on the nature of the difficulty, different approaches may be suggested:**

- At times of acute crises, medication can help to reduce symptoms, allowing you to regain control
- If you experience panic attacks, specific techniques may help you to learn to cope
- Counselling may help you to understand the nature of your difficulty, to manage symptoms and to address the thoughts and feelings that create anxiety in the first place
- Where a specific phobia is causing difficulty, you may benefit from learning to cope directly with the situation rather than restricting your activities in order to avoid it.

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The Service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email [counselling@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@westminster.ac.uk). See webpage [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling) for further information.
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. Contact [studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk) or visit [westminster.ac.uk/advice](http://westminster.ac.uk/advice)
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 0203 506 8800 or visit [westminster.ac.uk/disability](http://westminster.ac.uk/disability)
- The **Students' Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 and at [uwsu.com](http://uwsu.com)

## WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

### OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day. Tel 116 123; this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at [www.studentsagainstdepression.org](http://www.studentsagainstdepression.org)

Details of organisations offering help with managing anxiety and panic attacks can be found on the **Counselling Service** webpage, [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

## FURTHER READING

- **THE ANXIETY AND PHOBIA WORKBOOK**

*(Edmund J Bourne, New Harbinger Publication)*

Takes a holistic approach and offers useful advice and practical ways of managing anxiety, panic attacks and phobias.

- **MIND OVER MOOD**

*(Dennis Greenberger and Christine A Padesky, The Guilford Press)*

Concentrates on identifying and challenging the way we think and encouraging more realistic, balanced thoughts and beliefs.

DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT  
[WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING](http://WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING)

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