

## How to: Better understand anxiety

Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. Anxiety is a normal emotion and is your brain's way of reacting to stress or alerting you to potential danger ahead. For example you may feel worried or anxious before a job interview, a presentation or when making an important decision. Occasional anxiety is OK. Anxiety is not OK when it lasts for extended periods of time.

Anxiety has many psychological and physiological symptoms – many of which can be overwhelming. As anxiety is linked to the anticipation of threat – the body prepares for a **fight or flight** moment. Responses include: dilated pupils, dry mouth, raised heart rate, slowing down of digestive system, tensing of muscles. The physical symptoms of anxiety can be frightening, which can then make you feel even more anxious.

When feelings of anxiety become constant, overwhelming and affect how you interact with your family and friends or how you study, it's important to prioritise self-help techniques or to seek help with a professional as quickly as possible.

### Do I have symptoms of anxiety?

- Do you spend large periods of time during your day worrying?
- Do you feel nervous, uneasy or on edge?
- Do you often experience unpleasant physical sensations like 'butterflies' in your stomach, dizziness, breathlessness and muscle tension?
- Do you find it hard to relax or 'switch off'?

### Common signs and symptoms of anxiety

Physical	Feeling	Thinking	Behavioural
Tightening of chest / pain in chest	Overwhelmed	'I can't control myself'	Avoiding situations and tasks
Tense muscles / muscle pain	Scared / dread – something bad is going to happen	'I'm going crazy'	Difficulty making decisions
Racing heart / heart palpitations	Uptight	'People are judging me'	Poor concentration
Restless / on edge	Irritable / snappy / lack of patience	'I can't cope'	Relying on alcohol/drugs
Shortness of breath/ breathing faster	Panic	'Something bad is going to happen'	Compulsive behaviour

## What causes anxiety?

People can feel anxious for lots of reasons:

Psychological	Social	Biological
Negative thoughts about self, others or the world	Bullying	Personal history of anxiety
Early life experiences	Stress at work / heavy workload	Family history of anxiety
Learned anxious behaviour from others	Relationship & family problems	Illness / physical injury
	Financial difficulties	
	Caring for someone who is unwell	
	Death of a loved one	

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## Anxiety Management Strategies

There are many strategies available that can help you to manage your anxiety.

It may take some time to find what works for you. If your anxiety is difficult to manage **please seek professional support.**

### 1. Healthy lifestyle

Be active, eat well, sleep well, spend time with friends & family, take time to do activities you enjoy, spend time in nature

### 2. Slow, deep breathing

When you become anxious your breathing becomes faster and shallower. You can calm your heart rate by practising the following breathing exercise

1. Breathe in deeply through your nose into the belly
2. Hold for a moment
3. Exhale slowly through pursed lips, as if you are blowing out through a straw
4. As you breathe out let your shoulders drop and relax
5. Repeat 5 times

### 3. Tension Release

A physical symptom of anxiety is muscle tension. Use the following exercise to release tension from the body

1. Stand up or lie down, close your eyes, tune into your body, 1 deep breathe out
2. Breathe in deeply
3. Make fists with your hands
4. Hold your breath and tense up all your muscles
5. When you can't hold your breathe longer open your hands and exhale strongly 'HA!'
6. Do this 3 times, with pauses in between

### 4. Meditation

Anxiety is linked to a terrible, future event. Staying in the present moment can help bring you back to where you are. Check out [Guided Meditations](#)

### 5. Get to know your anxiety

Keep a diary – notice when your anxiety is at it's best – and worst. Look for patterns and take pro-active steps to manage your anxiety

### 6. Be kind to yourself

Remember you are not defined by your anxiety. You are not weak. You are not inferior. Give yourself the same kindness and care you would give a good friend. Check out [Dr Kristen Neff](#)

### 7. Challenge your self-talk

What you think, feel and do when you are anxious often contributes to your level of anxiety. Anxiety can lead to you over-estimating the danger in a situation as well as underestimate your ability to handle it. Try the short exercise below to see how your thoughts, feelings, behaviours and how your body feels are all connected, and can affect each other.

**Ways to manage anxiety**

**Situation**

Describe your situation: Where you were, who you were with, and what was happening  
 Eg. I was at a work event with a group of people I didn't know very well

**Your thoughts:**  
 eg. 'I will have no-one to talk to'

**How your body felt:**  
 Eg. Sweaty, shaky, dizzy

**Your feelings:**  
 eg. Alone, scared, embarrassed

**What you did:**  
 eg. Stayed at the back of room

**!**  
 If in doubt, talk to a close family member, friend, colleague. For professional support you can email the [University Psychological Support team](#) or refer to the external psychologist directory available at [SLP.lu](http://SLP.lu)

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