

# How do I manage **ANXIETY AND WORRY?**



## **Why is feeling anxious or worried important to talk about?**

Anxiety is an emotion which we can all experience at one time or another, for a variety of reasons. We know that having a health condition, facing changes in life and difficult medical decisions (e.g. antenatally), or dealing with traumatic physical events or unexpected medical interventions can be a source of anxiety for patients and their friends and family.



One common feature of anxiety is to worry, which is thinking about negative events happening in the future, often characterised by negative 'what if?' scenarios.

We know that when faced with uncertainty, e.g. awaiting test results, we tend to feel anxious as a result of overestimating the likelihood of a bad outcome and underestimating our positive ability to cope with it.

## **What is the benefit of reducing my anxiety and worry?**

We know that when someone is anxious about a certain situation or event, people may manage their anxiety by avoiding that situation; this can help in the short term as anxiety is reduced. However, avoiding something may negatively impact your physical health in the longer term, e.g. avoiding a test or procedure for their condition for instance will mean that you don't get the treatment that you might need. Reducing your anxiety and worry can help you to improve your long term mood overall and better connect with what's important to you.

## **How can you use this toolkit?**

This toolkit is designed to provide you with information about some of the symptoms of anxiety and worry and also provides some techniques that you can use to help you reduce these symptoms. At the end of the toolkit, there are also links to further information and support if you wish to explore this area in more detail.

# General principles to consider

Anxiety is a normal human emotion. However, if it gets in the way of you living your life the way you want to, or if you feel that you cannot stop or control feeling anxious or worried, then it may be helpful to try some of the suggested tips in this guide and from additional support services listed below. When we are faced with a threat, our body automatically responds by going in to 'fight or flight' mode. This is shown in a number of ways - a variety of which are listed below, perhaps you can think of some more examples:

## 1 Thoughts

- Lots of racing thoughts, mind may jump from topic to topic
- 'What if?' worries, 'predicting' the future – often negative predictions
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.

When anxiety is problematic, it may stop you from doing certain things, this can often create a vicious cycle. The vicious cycle of anxiety is when each of the symptoms listed above feed into one another, i.e. the more anxious thoughts we have, the greater our emotional and physical response, and so on.

## 2 Feeling

- Tense or 'on edge'
- Irritable

When faced with uncertainty, e.g. waiting for the outcome of test results, our minds are prone to 'assuming the worst'. These negative thoughts happen automatically; often we believe our thoughts to be true without considering if there is an alternative, more balanced perspective. By challenging our negative, automatic thoughts, we can reduce our anxiety and worry and feel more able to connect with what's important to us.

## 3 Physical sensations

- Muscle tension
- Sweating
- Heart beats faster
- Breathing more quickly

## 4 Behaviours

- Sleep difficulties
- Avoidance of certain places/activities
- Finding it hard to sit still, restless.

# Top tips and strategies

Here are some techniques that you can try to help reduce your anxiety:

1

**Keep a diary of when you feel anxious** – by identifying triggers for

anxiety and being aware of what's helpful in reducing your anxiety can help you to respond more quickly if and when you notice your early warning signs of anxiety in the future.

2

**Practice using relaxation techniques** to help reduce the symptoms of anxiety.

This can be practiced in different ways, including using breathing, visualisation and progressive muscle relaxation techniques (see relaxation resources below).

3

We often try to avoid things that make us feel anxious, which tends

to keep anxiety going in the longer term. Therefore to help reduce anxiety, try to **gradually reduce your avoidance of anxiety provoking situations**, starting with things that don't make you that anxious and working up to the things that make you more anxious. We often avoid things that makes us feel anxious as we believe that the outcome will be extremely unpleasant and/or we will not be able to cope with it. However, we often find that when faced with what we were avoiding, the outcome is better than we anticipated and/or we cope with it better than we thought we would. For instance, anxiety regarding medical procedures, such as having injections – often we find the procedure itself is not as bad as we had thought it would be.

4

**When you notice that you are worrying, ask yourself a couple of questions:**

- Is this a real situation that's happening now?
- Is this something that I have control over?
- If your answer is yes, then use problem solving techniques to identify possible solutions – what can I do, when, how, whose help do I need?
- If your answer is no, then use alternative worry management techniques below and see additional resource links.

5

**Worry management tips:**

- Focus on the here and now – rather than focusing on 'what if' thoughts about the future and take longer, slower, deeper breaths (see relaxation resources below) to reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety as listed above
- Schedule in specific 'worry time' each day, e.g. 6.00pm to 6.30pm, write down a worry you notice during the day and agree to worry about it during your designated time. This can help you reduce the perceived power of worries, you may also find that many of the worries that came to mind during the day don't feel as concerning when you reach your worry time.

# WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

1

## **Speak to your healthcare team**

if you feel concerned about your condition or other things that may be going on in your life – there may be additional services within the hospital which offer further guidance and support on this topic, such as self-help resources.

**Some teams in the hospital have a psychologist and/or counsellor as a member of their team**, who can speak to patients and their families if they feel anxious or worried and that this is negatively impacting their lives – ask a member of your healthcare team who knows you well, such as your clinical nurse specialist, if they can make a referral on your behalf.

**The hospital website** <http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/> contains written and audio information and tools for managing stress, including:

- 'Overcoming stress and anxiety' [http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/media/2205201/overcoming\\_stress\\_and\\_anxiety\\_final\\_12\\_pages.pdf](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/media/2205201/overcoming_stress_and_anxiety_final_12_pages.pdf) this is a more detailed booklet which provides more in-depth information and advice on reducing stress and anxiety. Copies are available in the BHOC Information and Support Centre.

- The booklet includes a free relaxation CD guided relaxation audio <http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/your-hospitals/bhoc/information-and-support/useful-resources/>.

There are additional toolkits on the UH Bristol website for managing common concerns, such as overcoming stress, insomnia and low mood, please refer to these guides for more information and support.

2

## **Links to appropriate resources**

**1. NHS Choices website** contains more information on anxiety and provides links for further information and support <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/anxiety/Pages/Introduction.aspx>.

**2. Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust** have created a self-help guide for managing anxiety, which includes more information and coping techniques that you can use: <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Anxiety%20A4%202016%20FINAL.pdf>.

**3. 'Moodjuice' website** and downloadable self-help guides are produced by Choose Life Falkirk and the Adult Clinical Psychology Service, NHS Forth Valley. There are various guides for improving wellbeing, including managing anxiety: <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/anxiety.asp>.



These toolkits have been written by NHS clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists working for University Hospitals Bristol. They have been co-designed with service users and healthcare staff. These toolkits are only intended to provide general advice and information. Please discuss your individual needs with your doctor or specialist nurse. If you would like more information about psychology services please go to:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/>

We would like to thank patients and other healthcare staff for their contributions to this toolkit.

For access to other patient toolkits please go to the following address:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/resources/>

For this leaflet in large print, audio or PDF format, please email [patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk](mailto:patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk)

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