

Anxiety

An information leaflet for carers

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is when someone experiences pervasive, excessive, and unrealistic worrying thoughts and the accompanying physical responses in response to various situations. Anxiety can have either a sudden or a more gradual onset, and this typically tends to occur at any point between early adolescence and the late twenties. At the time of onset stressful life events are commonplace.

How does anxiety affect individuals? What does it look like?

A wide range of physical symptoms are associated with the experience of anxiety, so much so that some individuals often present with these symptoms only, with no recognition of the fact that the root of their problems might be psychological in nature. These symptoms occur as the body prepares for 'fight or flight', and whilst some of these bodily changes might be useful in situations which present genuine danger, they are inappropriate when no real danger is present.

Symptoms include -

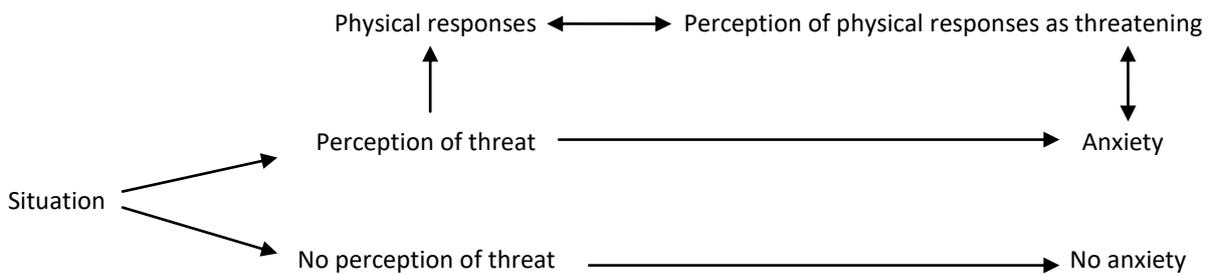
- Muscle tension
- Twitching and shaking
- Restlessness
- Becoming tired very easily
- Breathlessness
- Palpitations
- Sweating
- Dry mouth
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Flushes or chills
- Frequent urination
- Difficulty swallowing
- Feeling on edge
- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia
- Irritability

The thoughts of an individual who is experiencing anxiety will tend to revolve around the themes of being unable to cope, expecting others to think negatively of them, fears that they will not perform well, and concerns about their physical health.

Cognitive models of anxiety

In everyday life there are many situations which everybody would consider to be dangerous. In these situations individuals feel threatened, and this is rational in the presence of actual danger. When someone is experiencing anxiety however, they are likely to overestimate how threatening a particular situation or set of circumstances are because they have a style of thinking which is inherently negative and dysfunctional. Thoughts such as ‘these people think I am boring’ in a social situation or ‘I can’t do anything right’ in a situation where one feels under pressure to perform well are examples of this, and these kick start the physical responses described above. In turn, these physical responses can be interpreted as threatening in themselves, heightening anxiety further still. Thus it is not events *per se* which are responsible for the production of anxiety, but the relative threat (physical and psychosocial) which one perceives in any given situation and in response to their own physical responses.

Cognitive model of anxiety



How can I help to make it better?

Giving information about anxiety

It can be useful to provide individuals with information about the nature of their anxiety. This can include accessible descriptions of the symptoms they experience, why they experience anxiety, and the fact that the bodily changes which happen during anxiety are not dangerous. The type and level of information given should be tailored according to the needs and abilities of the individual.

Distraction

Distraction techniques can be used to manage the immediate symptoms of anxiety. Techniques to try include

- Asking questions which encourage the individual to focus on an object (e.g. “Where is ...?” “What colour is it?” “What is it for?”)
- Asking questions which encourage the individual to focus on their five senses (e.g. “What can you see/hear/taste/feel/smell?”)
- Mental exercises (e.g. thinking of an animal beginning with each letter of the alphabet, remembering a favourite walk in detail)
- Talk to the individual about pleasant memories and fantasies
- Do an activity which will occupy the body and mind (e.g. crosswords, puzzles, sports)

Activity schedules

Planning daily activities using visually accessible planners can help to reduce anxiety which occurs in relation to day to day activities. These can also be used to identify periods of anxiety and their triggers.

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation helps to show individuals that they have some control over their symptoms and also helps individuals to think more positively. For some, planning enjoyable and relaxing activities throughout their week is sufficient however for others, more formal training in relaxation is required. With these individuals it is important to know that relaxation is a skill which must be learned through repeated practice with the aim of being able to use it during any everyday activity. Please refer to the Behavioural Relaxation Training DVD for instructions on how to do this.