

Anxiety Fact Sheet

for Young People
& Their Families

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or fear that shows up in our body, thoughts, and emotions all at once.

Everyone feels anxious sometimes—it's a normal part of life! In fact, a little bit of anxiety can be helpful. For example, feeling a bit nervous before a big test can actually help you focus and stay motivated. But when anxiety becomes too strong or sticks around all the time, it can start to get in the way of everyday life, making things feel harder and more overwhelming.

Fight/Flight/Freeze Response

When anxiety kicks in, our brain goes into protection mode, activating what's called the fight, flight, or freeze response. This is our body's way of getting ready to deal with danger—even if the danger isn't real.

Think about the feeling before a big test. Your body might react in different ways—you might feel the urge to argue with yourself about why the test is unfair (fight), feel like running out of the room (flight), or go completely blank, unable to think (freeze). These reactions are totally normal—it's just your brain trying to protect you, even when there's nothing to escape from or fight against.

What causes anxiety?

Anxiety can develop for many reasons, often due to a mix of life experiences, thinking patterns, biology, and evolution.

Life Events

Stressful experiences, especially when they happen all at once, can contribute to anxiety. If someone is dealing with work pressure, financial worries, and relationship struggles simultaneously, it's understandable that they may feel overwhelmed. Past experiences, such as bullying or trauma, can also make a person more prone to anxiety in similar situations later in life.

Thinking Patterns

Some people naturally tend to expect the worst or feel they must always be on guard for potential dangers. While this might feel like a way to prepare for problems, it keeps the mind constantly alert, making it hard to relax and switch off.

Evolutionary Factors

Anxiety exists because it has helped humans survive. In dangerous situations, anxiety activates the body's fight-or-flight response—quickening the heart rate, speeding up breathing, and sharpening focus—so we can react to threats. While this response is helpful in real danger, it can become overwhelming when triggered too often by everyday situations.

Biology & Genetics

Anxiety can run in families, meaning some people may be more naturally predisposed to feeling anxious. However, environment and learned behaviors also play a role, making it a combination of nature and nurture.





SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

Physical Symptoms:

- Fast heartbeat, rapid breathing
- Shaking, sweating, tense muscles
- Stomach aches, “butterflies,” dry mouth
- Feeling weak or unsteady

Thoughts & Feelings:

- Constant worrying (“What if I fail?” “Nobody likes me.” “Something bad will happen.”)
- Feeling out of control, numb, or on edge
- Struggling with school, friendships, or social situations

Behaviours:

- Avoiding school, social events, or being away from family
- Repeating actions (e.g., checking doors, organizing things)
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Becoming more snappy or reactive

When is anxiety a problem?

Anxiety becomes a problem when it starts getting in the way of daily life. Signs to look out for include:

- Constant worrying and feeling on edge
- Struggling to relax or make decisions
- Avoiding things, including friends and family
- Changes in sleep, feeling unwell, changes in eating habits
- Frequent anxious thoughts like “I can’t handle this,” “What if something bad happens?” or “They won’t like me.”

If anxiety feels overwhelming or never seems to switch off, it might be time to get some support.

What keeps anxiety going?

Anxiety often persists due to patterns of thinking and behavior that unintentionally maintain it.

Worrying Feels Like a Solution

People sometimes believe worrying will help them be better prepared or avoid bad outcomes. However, excessive worry often leads to feeling more anxious rather than solving problems.

Fear of Anxiety Symptoms

Physical signs of anxiety—like a racing heart or shortness of breath—can feel alarming. Worrying about these sensations can make them seem even worse, creating a cycle where anxiety feeds itself.

Avoidance of Anxiety Triggers

Anxious people often avoid situations that make them uncomfortable, like social events or tasks that might involve judgment. While this brings short-term relief, it prevents them from realizing that they can handle these situations, keeping the anxiety alive.

Lifestyle Factors

Having little time for rest and enjoyable activities can increase stress, while having too much free time can leave room for overthinking and worry. Finding balance is key to managing anxiety effectively.

Understanding these patterns is the first step toward breaking the cycle of anxiety. Recognizing avoidance, worry, and unhelpful thinking can help shift towards healthier coping strategies.



Worry vs. Problem Solving

Worry and problem solving may seem similar, but they're very different. Worry keeps us stuck in our heads, going in circles without taking action. Problem solving, on the other hand, involves doing something to address a situation.

Think of it like a broken record—worry just repeats the same thoughts without moving forward. For example, Adam worries about what his teacher will think of his essay. He keeps overthinking—Is it good enough? Did I miss something? What if I get a bad grade?—but isn't actually writing.

Problem solving means taking action, like setting up a meeting with his professor, asking a classmate for feedback, or committing to writing for 30 minutes a day. These steps don't guarantee success, but they break the cycle of worry and give him a chance to improve.

It's hard to problem solve when anxiety is high, but recognising the difference between worry and action is the first step. The more you practice spotting worry, the easier it becomes to shift into problem-solving mode.



AVOIDANCE AND ANXIETY

Anxious behaviours often stem from an attempt to reduce discomfort. While avoiding anxiety feels good in the moment, it actually strengthens anxiety over time.

What is avoidance?

Avoidance includes anything you do (or don't do) to escape anxiety—like avoiding situations, seeking reassurance, over-preparing, or mentally reviewing worst-case scenarios. Some avoidance is obvious, like skipping an event. Others are subtle, like constantly checking emails at dinner to ease work stress.

The Problem with Avoidance

Avoidance brings short-term relief but worsens anxiety in the long run. It prevents you from facing fears, achieving goals, and learning that you can handle discomfort. Every time you avoid, you reinforce the idea that avoidance is necessary, keeping anxiety in control.

Breaking the Cycle

Instead of avoiding, try facing anxiety in small, manageable steps. This helps you realize that feared outcomes are often unrealistic—and even if they happen, you can cope. Start noticing when you use avoidance and how it impacts your anxiety over time.



TYPES OF ANXIETY

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Some young people worry constantly—about school, friendships, family, or even things like the weather. They may find it hard to relax, feel restless, or seek a lot of reassurance. This ongoing worry can make it difficult to focus, enjoy activities, or feel confident in themselves.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD involves upsetting thoughts (obsessions) that lead to repetitive behaviours (compulsions) to feel better. A young person might feel the need to wash their hands repeatedly, check things over and over, or follow specific routines. These behaviours can take up a lot of time and get in the way of daily life.

Panic Disorder

Panic attacks can feel overwhelming and come out of nowhere—racing heart, dizziness, shortness of breath. Some young people start avoiding places where they've had a panic attack before, worried it might happen again.

Specific Phobias

Many young people have fears, but a phobia is a strong, lasting fear that disrupts daily life. It might be a fear of animals, storms, medical procedures, or heights. No amount of reassurance makes it go away, and the child may go to great lengths to avoid their fear.

Social Anxiety

Some young people feel extremely self-conscious in social situations. They might avoid speaking in class, making friends, or even eating in public. Fear of being judged or embarrassed can make social interactions feel overwhelming.



Separation Anxiety

If a child has a hard time being away from parents or caregivers, they might have separation anxiety. They may refuse sleepovers, struggle with school drop-offs, or constantly worry about something bad happening when apart.

Selective Mutism

Some children speak comfortably at home but freeze up in certain situations, like at school or around unfamiliar people. They may avoid eye contact and rely on a close friend or sibling to communicate for them.

ANXIETY, SCHOOL REFUSAL & DEPRESSION

Why Some young people Avoid School?

When a child refuses school, it's not always about school itself. Anxiety can show up in different ways—fear of being called on in class, worrying about social situations, or dreading a panic attack. Every child has their own reasons, and avoiding school can feel like the only way to cope. The focus isn't just on attendance but on understanding what's driving their fear.

The Link Between Anxiety & Depression

Anxiety can be exhausting. Constant worry, avoidance, and fear take a toll, sometimes leading to depression. Some teens feel stuck, withdrawing from friends and activities until they feel isolated. For others, anxiety and depression exist side by side.

A helpful question to ask: *If your anxiety disappeared, would you still feel depressed?* If the answer is yes, depression may be separate. If not, anxiety could be the root of the problem. Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is particularly linked to depression, as chronic worry erodes confidence and self-trust. Over time, constant fear can drain self-esteem and make the world feel overwhelming.

A FEW COPING SKILLS

Belly Breathing

This simple breathing exercise helps calm your nervous system. Try it lying down when you're first learning:

1. Get comfortable—lie on your back with a pillow under your head and your knees bent (or stretch your legs out if that feels better).
2. Place one hand on your belly and the other on your chest.
3. Inhale slowly through your nose, letting your belly rise while keeping your chest as still as possible.
4. Exhale slowly, feeling your belly fall as the air leaves your lungs.
5. Keep going for a few minutes, focusing on your breath. If your mind drifts, gently bring your attention back.

"5-4-3-2-1" Grounding Exercise

A quick way to bring yourself back to the present:

- 5 things you can see around you
- 4 things you can feel (e.g., feet on the floor, fabric on your skin)
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you like about yourself

Grounding Statements to Repeat When You're Struggling

- This feeling won't last forever.
- I can get through this.
- My anxiety doesn't define me.
- These are just feelings—they will pass.
- I've handled tough moments before, and I can handle this too.

Disclaimer: This information is for general guidance only and it is not a professional medical advice. It doesn't consider your personal situation, mental health, or physical well-being. Please don't use it to diagnose or treat yours or someone else's medical condition. If you have concerns about your health, always reach out to a qualified healthcare professional. Never ignore or delay seeking medical advice because of something you've read here—when in doubt, speak to a professional.

Better Sleep for Anxious Minds

- Stick to a regular sleep schedule, even on weekends.
- Avoid screens (phone, tablet, TV) at least 30 minutes before bed.
- Try a relaxing bedtime routine—reading, stretching, or listening to calming music.
- Keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet.
- If your mind is racing, jot down your thoughts in a journal to clear your head.

Sleep is fuel for your brain—give yourself the best chance to rest and recharge.

SUPPORT AND TREATMENT

If anxiety starts controlling your life, reaching out for help is important. Therapy—like CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), or mindfulness-based approaches—can provide tools to manage fear and build confidence. In some cases, medication may also be helpful.

How Parents Can Help

- Encourage open conversations—listen without dismissing their fears.
- Validate emotions, even if they seem irrational.
- Help your child to understand where their feelings come from to make them feel more manageable.

With the right support, young people can learn to face their fears and take back control.