



UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY AND HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY DEAL WITH IT



MOTIVATION ASSIST

POSITIVE IDEAS ON WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

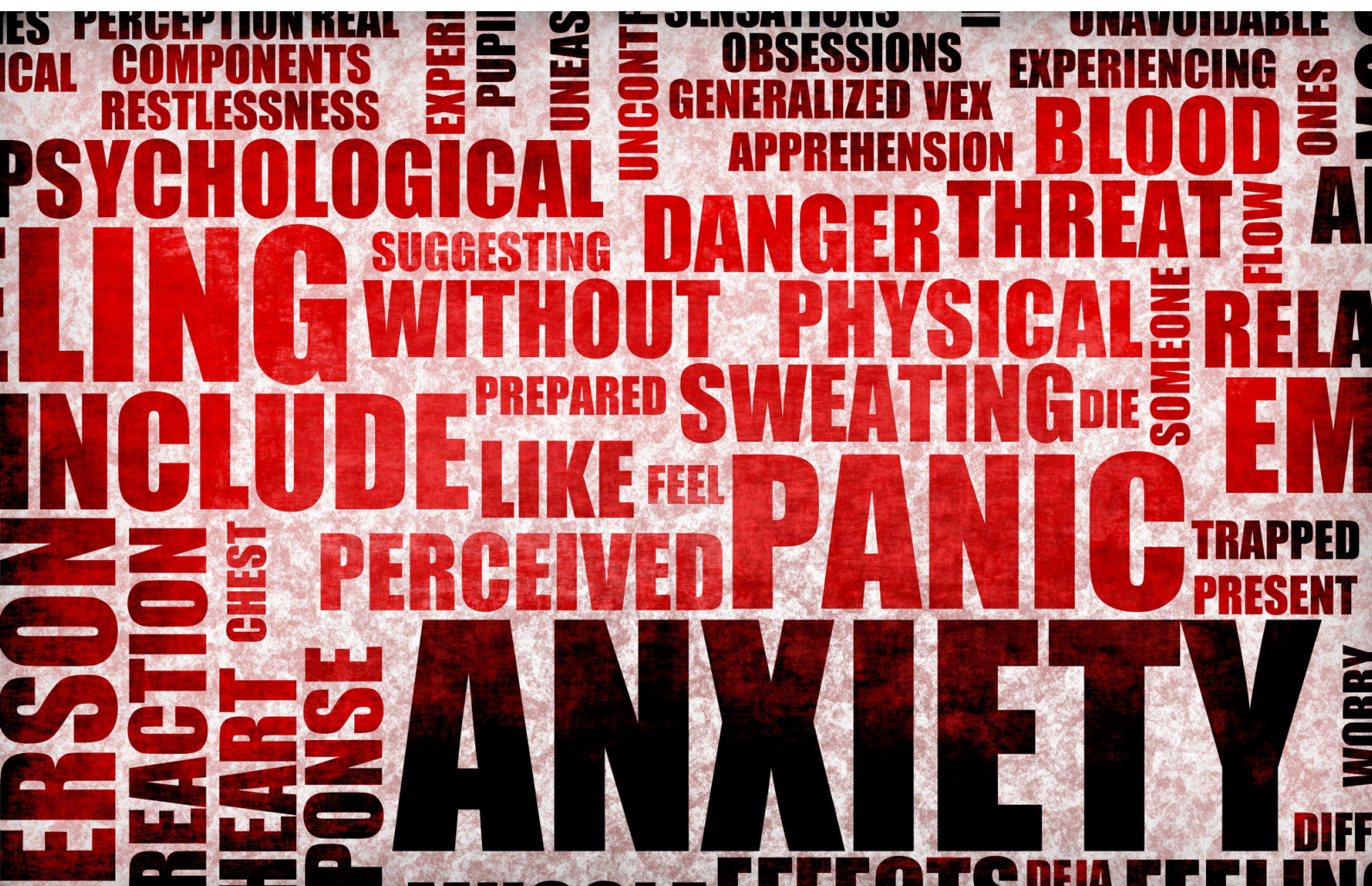
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Introduction

It may come as no surprise to you that surveys are suggesting that we are facing an anxiety epidemic, with spikes in both anxiety and stress reported over the past decade. We only have to look around us to notice how pressured life can be. But the good news is that anxiety disorders are actually highly treatable – despite this, the figures suggest that only around 40% of those suffering seek treatment. Let's put an end to suffering in silence and do something about it.

We all feel anxious from time to time – it's extremely common and some believe that levels of anxiety are heightening in this age of too much choice and the pressures to be 'perfect' from social media, particularly for young people.

In prehistoric times, humans faced challenges, which meant the body was designed for 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze'. In today's world, although we may not have the same challenges, our bodies still release the same stress hormones when we are faced with less serious threats (they are not 'life or death' but our bodies think they are! The chemical release raises our blood sugar (followed by a crash), our blood pressure and our pulse; slows our digestion; dilates our pupils; and causes us to breathe more shallowly. While these changes prepare us for fast action, we don't usually take it, so our hormones don't disperse. Instead, our anxiety sits within us, without a release, making us vulnerable to emotional and physical problems. To stay healthy, we need to learn new ways to avoid or disperse those chemicals.



It can be, if left untreated. Anxiety disorders including Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are serious and require treatment. GAD is very common and is usually diagnosed if the individual is suffering from 'excessive anxiety and worry most days about many things for at least six months'. Anyone suffering from these disorders needs professional advice. However, you don't have to have a 'disorder' to suffer from the unwelcomed effects of anxiety, and it should be addressed in some way.

In short, stress is your body's reaction to a trigger and is generally a short-term experience. Stress can be positive or negative. When stress kicks in and helps you pull off that deadline, it's positive. When stress results in insomnia, poor concentration, and impaired ability to do the things you normally do, it's negative. Stress is a response to a threat in any given situation. Stress is not a mental health diagnosis, but it can make you feel very anxious and emotional.

stress

anxiety

depression

fatigue

headache

pain

tension

worry

upset

exhausted

loneliness

irritability

temper

agitated

overwhelmed

nervous

strain

tense

panic

angst

despair

mood

problems

work

pressure

failure

relationships

sadness

change

family

worrying

disorders

bills

money

STRESS

DEPRESSION

MENTAL

OVERLOAD

NERVES

relationships

health

sadness

exhausted

fear

tension

despair

panic

angst

MENTAL

overload

nervous

worry

strain

tense

relationships



Feelings of Anxiety or Stress

Anxiety and feelings of stress is the body's way of responding to being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight; this happens whether the danger is real or not. It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism. Primitive man wouldn't have survived for long without this life-saving response. It works so well, that it often kicks in when it's not needed - when the danger is in our heads rather than in reality. We think we're in danger, so that's enough to trigger the system into overdrive.

Signs include:

- Feelings anxious or worried a lot of the time
- Feeling constantly 'on edge' or on 'high alert'
- Finding it difficult to relax or 'switch off'
- Avoiding situations that make you feel anxious
- Breathing becomes fast and shallow
- Physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, dizziness, nausea or a tight chest
- Thoughts become muddled (our brains are literally 'hijacked' making it hard to think clearly or rationally)
- Feeling irritable a lot of the time
- Having difficulties sleeping or eating
- Feeling panicked, or experiencing panic 'attacks'
- Using unhealthy 'coping' techniques to deal with the feelings – such as smoking, drinking alcohol or eating junk foods/overeating



What are the Effects?

Due to the unpleasant nature of anxiety, people often worry that experiencing it is harmful. For example they may fear that regularly worrying will make them go mad or that the physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. heart racing) are signs of a serious health problem. Such fears naturally make people even more anxious which creates a vicious cycle of anxiety. However, when exploring anxiety more closely, we can see that it is a very healthy response which actually helps to protect us. By learning more about anxiety and why we experience it in the first place, we can see that it is not harmful. In fact, according to Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal, the way we view stress and anxiety is crucial – if we view it as bad for us, then it might be, but if we see it as something that helps us to get things done and to overcome challenges, then it won't damage our health. See her wonderful TED Talk [here](#)

Test Your Own Levels

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) is a method to help measure the severity of your anxiety. It involves answering 21 multiple-choice questions that ask you to rate your symptoms during the past week. Find and print it [here](#). Alternatively try out the online diagnostic test known as the [Zung Self-Rating Anxiety Scale](#)

These tests are not a replacement for attending your GP to discuss your anxiety or stress levels; they are merely a starting point. A GP may conduct a physical examination, including blood or urine tests to rule out underlying medical conditions that could contribute to your symptoms so it's crucial that you don't overlook this and that you do attend your GP for this reason and others (including the discussion of medication, should it be deemed necessary for your condition).

The Root Cause of Anxiety

There can be a multitude of reasons for anxiety. Researchers are not sure of the exact cause but it's likely that a combination of factors play a role; these include genetic and environmental factors, as well as brain chemistry. **Life events** can be the root cause, particularly if someone is experiencing lots of different pressures at once (such as work pressures, while having a young family and a dependent older relative). Also **certain thinking styles** can make you more susceptible, for instance, people who think in worst-case scenario ways or people who believe that they must be constantly on guard in case something bad happens. Our core beliefs, developed in childhood, may make us more susceptible. For instance, if we see the world as a dangerous place, then that's how we are likely to experience it. **Nature/nurture** are other reasons; in other words, if someone in your family experiences anxiety, there is an increased chance that you will have a similar personality, although this is not always certain.

Menopausal Anxiety

Anxiety is very common and often one of the most difficult symptoms during the peri-menopause and menopause. Many women suddenly feel unable to cope with situations that were never a problem before. They feel overwhelmed by simple aspects of day-to-day living. This can be frightening and obviously undermine a woman's confidence. Part of the explanation lies with the fact that oestrogen plays an important role in managing the chemical activities in our brains. When the level of oestrogen is high, we feel well but, as levels drop, a number of symptoms such as low mood and anxiety can set in. Read our menopause report for more about how to relieve symptoms [here](#).

Root Cause



Be Aware of Avoidance

In some ways, it is less important to know what causes anxiety, and more important to know what stops us overcoming it. One other important factor that can keep people's anxiety going is that they often change their behaviour as a result of their anxiety. For example, they may avoid going to a party because they have spotted many potential 'dangers'. Similarly, they avoid public speaking because they worry about being negatively evaluated. Unfortunately because people tend to use such avoidance strategies, they can never see that things would often go better than they thought, but avoidance means that their anxiety remains – or even worsens - as a result. That's why it is crucial to be aware of your avoidance, and to try to work through it and do the thing that you fear. Chances are that you will feel wonderful afterwards, and that you are more well equipped to try it the next time, and the time after that, all the while reaffirming your ability to cope.

Pushing the Wrong Buttons

Many people look for the solution to their anxiety outside of themselves, so they choose coping strategies or 'buttons' such as alcohol, food, smoking, drugs or gambling/shopping addictions. However, we know that these strategies don't work, often making the anxiety or stress worse. Instead, it's important to try to learn to sit with our feelings and to realise that peace and calm are already within us, if we look for them. Also, many people don't realise that it's important to practice relaxation techniques before they feel anxious – as a prevention strategy. We know this works. Some relaxation techniques are best used for prevention, while others are best used for intervention, at anxious times (see below). Many techniques can be used at both times.



The Buttons that Work:

Lifestyle Changes and Psychotherapeutic Approaches

Usually it's a matter of focusing on managing anxiety rather than ending or curing it forever. When talking to our clients, and from carrying out our own research, we find that the following lifestyle and psychotherapeutic approaches work best with anxiety and stress.

1. **Eating well:** this includes avoiding alcohol, nicotine, excessive caffeine (as it is 'anxiogenic' and therefore makes you more anxious if you consume too much of it) and other similar drugs. If you use food as a coping mechanism (often sugar or processed carbs), it is hard to stop as you can't 'ban' food from your life, but it is possible to learn how to have more control. Read our Truth about Sugar Report [here](#).
2. **Good quality sleep:** we know that being sleep deprived actually leads to raised cortisol (stress hormone) which makes us more stressed and anxious. Crucially, much research has emerged in recent years to suggest that the blue light from screens is interfering with the quality of our sleep – so live by the motto 'no screens for an hour before bed'.
3. **Getting some exercise/fresh air:** again, all the available evidence tells us that exercise improves mood and reduces stress, particularly when taken outdoors. It is not only a distraction, but on a physical level we know it reduces the stress hormones and boosts the hormones that makes us feel more relaxed and happier.

CHANGE



loading...

4. **Practising deep breathing (see below) or mindfulness meditation:** there is now a wealth of research on the benefits of meditation (even just sitting still for 10 minutes a day!) can have on our minds and our moods.
5. **Fostering relationships:** social interaction is key to our wellbeing; so much so, that according to a recent Harvard University study, the risk of premature death was shown to increase by a whopping 50% if there's a lack of strong relationships in your life (this equates to smoking roughly 15 cigarettes a day!).
6. **Slowing down:** anxious people rush from one task to the next often, without slowing down until they've burnt out. It's crucial to stop taking so much on, to practise saying 'no' and to build 'pockets' of time into your day (even just 5-10 minutes) to simply do nothing.
7. **Practising CBT techniques:** at Motivation, we show our clients how to practise useful Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques that teach us to challenge our unhelpful thoughts and to see things in a more realistic light.
8. **Be kind to yourself and practising self-care:** life can be challenging so cut yourself some slack. You don't have to be the perfect partner, parent or carer; just try to be 'good enough'. Read our blog on self-care [here](#).
9. **Open up and talk:** thankfully, mental health is much more openly discussed in Ireland than it was even a decade ago. Talking about your worries will make you feel much better than bottling them up. Talk to a trusted loved one who will listen without judgement, or choose someone who doesn't know you. Try the Irish Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy <https://www.iacp.ie/> or a helpline such as the Samaritans (call free on 116 123).

Simple Relaxation

It is important to make time to relax and do activities that are enjoyable. This can help to reduce your anxiety levels by calming the body and mind. It can also help you to sleep. Without taking the time to unwind, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and stressed. Relaxation can involve doing something that you enjoy, or just being by yourself. Good examples might be reading a book or having a bath. Exercise is also particularly effective at helping us to relax. What you do does not really matter. Try to choose something that you will look forward to and that gives you a break. Doing an activity that you enjoy will also give you less time to spend worrying. Here are a list of activities that might help you to relax:

- Read a book
- Watch your favourite TV show
- Go to the cinema
- Do something creative (e.g. draw, paint)
- Visit a friend or family member
- Have a bath

Try to find time to relax every day. This might seem difficult, but it is worth making time for. It can help you to feel a lot better. The Motivation audio guides have a relaxation/meditation sequence that you can listen to daily – see [here](#).



Controlled Breathing

A simple breathing technique involves focusing on and slowing down our breathing patterns. Many people find this simple exercise very relaxing. It can be particularly helpful for those who feel dizzy or light headed when they feel worried or stressed. This sometimes happens because people's breathing changes and gets quicker when they feel distressed. This can be an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience. It can make people even more on edge, and a vicious cycle can occur. Learning controlled breathing exercises can help you to manage these feelings more effectively. It can also help to give your mind and body a chance to calm down. Visit [here](#) for a brilliant guide to various breathing techniques from beginner's to advanced level


What to do when you feel anxious

STOP!

Pause, take a breath, don't react automatically

THINK DIFFERENTLY

Ask yourself these questions (they are the basis of CBT which helps to challenge your thoughts). CBT encourages us to ask ourselves, 'are my thoughts rational, helpful or constructive?' and 'what is a more helpful or alternative way of looking at this?'



*Take a break,
take a breath!*

- What am I reacting to?
- What is it that I think is going to happen here?
- Is this fact or opinion?
- What's the worst (and best) that could happen? What's most likely to happen?
- Am I getting things out of proportion?
- How important is this really? How important will it be in 6 months time?
- Am I overestimating the danger?
- Am I underestimating my ability to cope?
- Am I mind-reading what others might be thinking?
- Am I believing I can predict the future?
- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What advice would I give someone else in this situation?
- Just because I feel bad, doesn't mean things really are bad.
- What do I want or need from this person or situation? What do they want or need from me? Is there a compromise?
- What would be the consequences of responding the way I usually do?
- Is there another way of dealing with this? What would be the most helpful and effective action to take? (for me, for the situation, and for others)

A Note on Anxiety and Alcohol

If you're someone who suffers from anxiety, you may like a drink to 'calm the nerves' quite often. We know that this works temporarily – as alcohol is a sedative. However, in the longer term, it actually depresses the activity of your central nervous system that helps you feel relaxed. Alcohol actually **depletes** our levels of serotonin (happy chemical) over time so, for anyone suffering with their mood or anxiety levels, it is a big no-no. Of course, many people with anxiety disorders might not be aware that they actually have a disorder and they end up abusing or 'using' other drugs in an effort to feel better regularly. This creates dependence and serious addiction.

Further Reading

The following books may be able to offer support, information and advice.

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway by S Jeffers

How to turn your fear and indecision into confidence and action

How to Stop Worrying by Frank Tallis

A guide to making worry work for you, helping you to avoid stress and anxiety. The author sets out to teach how to understand fear and face the possibilities of life calmly.

Managing Anxiety by Helen Kennerley

Book teaches self-help skills and methods of controlling anxiety.

Overcoming Anxiety, Stress and Panic: A Five Areas Approach by Chris Williams

Divided into workbooks that are designed to help those experiencing mild to moderate levels of anxiety and panic, this title is easily accessible with boxes, checklists and bullet points to make the information easier to understand. The first workbooks should aid the reader in identifying and assessing the extent of their problem. The reader can then choose which workbooks may be most helpful and work on the exercises at their own pace.

Overcoming Panic by Derrick Silove

A complete course to help the reader beat panic attacks and the stresses they cause. The author, who has both researched and taught self-help techniques, describes clinically-proven therapy techniques.

Overcoming Panic, Anxiety and Phobias by Carol Goldman & Shirley Babior

This practical handbook, recommended for people whose lives are upset by worry, fear, or panic, offers coping strategies based on the latest clinical research. Personal stories of recovery, worksheets for recording symptoms and progress, and information on finding professional help make this book a must-read for anxiety sufferers who want to regain control of their life.

Overcoming Shyness and Social Phobia: A Step-by-step Guide by Ronald Rapee

This book provides a detailed programme for eliminating social anxieties. It is based on the latest cognitive behavioural treatments for social phobia. The book is written in simple language and provides a commonsense approach to treatment. Four people with social phobia are introduced at the beginning and these cases are followed throughout the book, illustrating the application of each technique.

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by Edmund J Bourne

This is a revision of the best-selling classic. It provides step-by-step help for sufferers of anxiety and phobic disorders. This edition offers the latest treatment strategies for the whole range of these problems - panic disorder, agoraphobia, generalised anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder - with revisions that include updated information on medications, mindfulness training, and health-related conditions that aggravate anxiety.

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It's not just *what* you eat, it's *why*