



Supporting people affected by rape and sexual abuse

# Anxiety



**“A worrier.”**

**“Bad with your nerves.”**

**“Stressed out.”**

**“Unable to relax.”**

These are all phrases we might use to describe someone who has a problem with anxiety. If someone has too much stress for too long, anxiety is very often the result.

There is a lot of information in this guide and it may be helpful to read it several times, or to read it a bit at a time, to get the most from it.

This guide is about anxiety, and aims to help you to:

- See whether or not you may be suffering from symptoms of anxiety.
- Understand what anxiety is, what can cause it, and what can keep it going.
- Overcome your anxiety by learning better ways of coping with it.

# Is it normal to feel anxious?

Anxiety is something we all experience from time to time. It is a normal response to situations that we see as a threat to us. For example, if we had to go into hospital, start therapy, attend court or report to the police, it would be normal to feel anxious. Anxiety at certain levels can even be helpful in some situations, like when we need to act under pressure, or cope with an emergency. Most people feel anxious at first when they come to our counselling and wellbeing service. This is a normal response.

# Some anxiety is not at all helpful because:

-  Symptoms of anxiety, whilst not dangerous, can be uncomfortable.
-  Symptoms can also be frightening particularly if someone does not know that these symptoms are just signs of anxiety
-  Sometimes people with anxiety symptoms worry that they may have something seriously wrong with them. This worry can then produce more anxiety symptoms which of course increases the worry!
-  When anxiety is severe and goes on for a long time it can stop people doing what they want to do.

Many people experience a problem with anxiety at some point in their life and often this is linked with stress. Anxiety is a common problem for people who have experienced rape or sexual abuse.

It may seem that nothing can help to ease anxiety. Perhaps you have experienced it for a long time and worrying feels like a habit. There are things you can do to reduce your anxiety and make it feel better. Perhaps the first step is to see whether or not you have a problem with anxiety.

# Do I have a problem with anxiety?

- “Whenever the bedroom door opens or closes I jump and feel worried.”
- “Sometimes my heart starts to pound, and I start to sweat.”
- Having to be amongst lots of people makes me tense and sometimes I snap at others even though I don’t mean to”.
- “ My throat feels tight and my mouth goes dry. I begin to get panicky and it feels like I’m going to stop breathing”.
- “I feel angry and irritable and on edge all the time”.

**These are some typical experiences of people who suffer from anxiety. If you are suffering from anxiety you may have thoughts like these yourself. Sometimes it is possible to have anxiety and not even know it, particularly if you don’t think of yourself as an anxious person.**

# How can anxiety affect you?

Anxiety can affect us in at least four different ways. It affects:

- The way we feel.
- The way we think.
- The way our body works.
- The way we behave.

In order to check out whether you may be suffering from anxiety, place a tick next to those symptoms you experience regularly.

If you are regularly experiencing some or all of these symptoms, it is likely that you have anxiety.

## **How you feel**

- Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened.
- Feeling something dreadful is going to happen.
- Tense, stressed, uptight, on edge, unsettled.
- Unreal, strange, woozy, detached.
- Panicky.

## **How you think**

- Constant worrying.
- Can't concentrate.
- Thoughts racing.
- Mind jumping from one thing to another.
- Imagining the worst and dwelling on it.
- Going over the same worries again and again.

# Common thoughts

- “I’m losing control.”
- “I’m cracking up.”
- “I’m going to faint.”
- “My legs are going to collapse.”
- “I’m going to have a heart attack.”
- “I’m going to make a fool of myself.”
- “I can’t cope.”
- “I’ve got to get out.”
- “I’m finished.”

# What happens to your body?

- Heart pounds, races, skips a beat.
- Chest feels tight or painful.
- Tingling or numbness in toes or fingers.
- Stomach churning or butterflies.
- Having to go to the toilet.
- Feeling jumpy or restless.
- Tense muscles.
- Body aching
- Sweating
- Dizzy, light headed.

# What do you do?

- Pace up and down.
- Starts job and not finish them.
- Fidget
- Stay on the go all the time.
- Talk quickly or more than usual.
- Become snappy and irritable.
- Drink alcohol, use drugs, want to smoke or vape more.
- Want to eat more (or less).
- Avoid feared situations.
- Shut yourself away from

# What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is the feeling we get when our body responds to a frightening or threatening experience. It has been called the fight or flight response and is simply your body preparing for action, either to fight danger or run away from it as fast as possible. The purpose of the physical symptoms of anxiety, therefore, is to prepare your body to cope with threat. To understand what is happening in your body, imagine for a minute that you hear someone creeping up behind you. You feel you are about to be attacked. As soon as you are aware of the threat your muscles tense ready for action. Your heart beats faster to carry blood to your muscles and brain, where it is most needed. You breathe faster to provide oxygen which is needed for energy. You sweat to stop your body overheating. Your mouth becomes dry and your tummy has butterflies. If you then realise that the attacker is in fact a friend, the feelings die away, but you may feel shaky and weak after the experience.

# What causes anxiety?

There may be many reasons why someone becomes anxious.

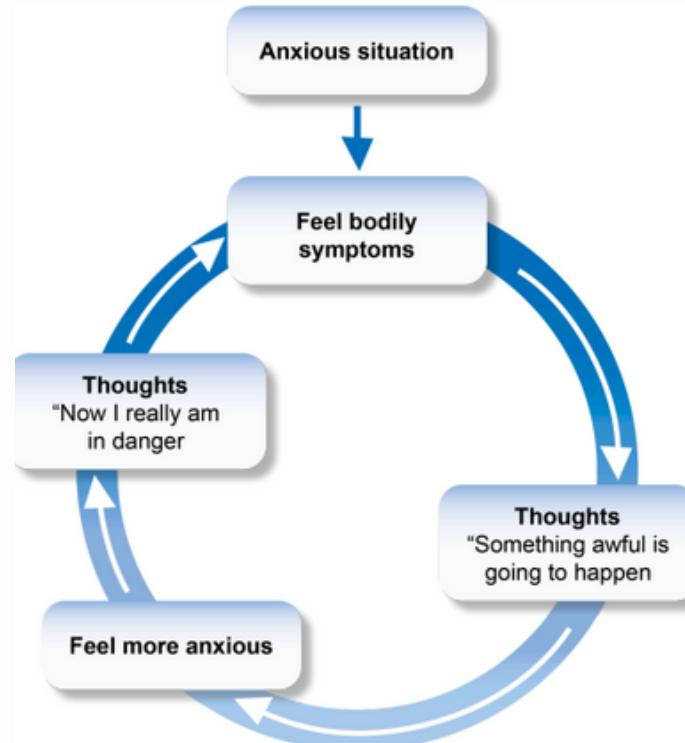
- Some people may have an anxious personality and have learned to worry.
- Others may have had a lot of stressful things to cope with, for example bereavements, redundancy, divorce, debts.
- A physical health problem, misuse of substances or a history of depression are known to affect anxiety (please consult your doctor or healthcare nurse if you think any of these may apply to you).
- Anxiety is a very common problem with at least one person in four suffering from anxiety at some point during their life.

# What keeps anxiety going?

Sometimes anxiety can go on and on, and become a lifelong problem. There can be a number of reasons for this:

- If someone has an anxious personality and is a worrier, then they will probably be in the habit of feeling anxious.
- Sometimes people have ongoing stresses over a number of years, which means they develop the habit of being anxious.
- **Circle of anxiety** – As the bodily symptoms of anxiety can be frightening, unusual and unpleasant, people often react by thinking that there is something physically wrong, or that something truly awful is going to happen.

This in itself causes more symptoms, and so a circle develops. It can be like a roundabout you can't get off. It can look a bit like this:



- **Fear of fear** – Someone who has experienced anxiety in a certain situation may start to predict feeling anxious, and become frightened of the symptoms themselves, this in turn actually causes the very symptoms that are feared. Fear of anxious symptoms coming on causes bodily symptoms.

# What keeps anxiety going?

- **Avoidance** - once an anxiety circle has developed, with lots of anxious thoughts increasing the anxiety symptoms, avoidance is often a way of coping. It is natural to avoid something that is dangerous, but the sorts of things that people tend to avoid when they suffer from anxiety are most often not real dangers but places that make them anxious; for example, shops crowded places.

Not only are these things not dangerous, but they are quite useful. Avoiding them can make life very inconvenient and difficult. This sort of avoidance can also result in a great loss of confidence which can affect how good you feel about yourself, which in turn makes you feel more anxious.

# Summary

- Anxiety is often the body's response to stress, although some of us may be a bit more prone to anxiety and worry than others.
- When we are suffering from anxiety, whilst it can be unpleasant, it is our body's normal response to threat or danger and is not dangerous.
- Anxiety symptoms are part of the fight or flight response and are intended to be helpful in spurring us into action.
- Anxiety becomes a problem when the symptoms are:
  - - severe and unpleasant;
  - - going on too long;
  - - happening too often;
  - - causing us to worry that there is something seriously wrong;
  - - stopping us doing what we want to do.
- Anxiety often becomes a vicious circle where our symptoms, thoughts and behaviour keep the anxiety going.

**Now spend a few moments trying to write down any of these ways that your anxiety may be being kept going.**

-  Unpleasant/frightening symptoms you may experience.
-  Your beliefs and thoughts about these symptoms.
-  Everyday things you are avoiding.
-  Current stresses in your life.

# How can I best manage my anxiety?

As we have learned, anxiety is not an illness and so can't be cured. If we can break into the circle of anxiety, however, we can learn ways of reducing our anxiety and getting it to be more manageable.

We can work on at least four different areas:

1. Understanding our anxiety better.
2. Reducing physical symptoms.
3. Altering our thoughts related to anxiety. How can I manage my anxiety better?
4. Changing our behaviours related to anxiety.

# Understanding anxiety

You may already by now have some ideas about what is causing your anxiety. The following sections will give advice on how to break out of the vicious circle that keeps anxiety going. Before you can do this though, it is really useful for you to understand your own anxiety better.

Is your anxiety related to certain situations, places or people?

Is it worse at particular times of the day?

Are there realistic worries you have that would make anyone anxious?

The following two exercises should help you to understand your anxiety better.

# Understanding anxiety

**Anxiety diary** - for a period of two weeks (or longer if you prefer) keep an hourly diary of your anxiety and activity level. Rate your anxiety from 0-10. Note down anything that seems important. Where were you at the time, who were you with, what were you doing, what were you thinking about? You may start to become more aware of situations that make you anxious or that you may even be avoiding. What is your general level of stress like? This information will help you begin to tackle your anxiety.

**Worry** - if you become aware that you have a realistic worry or problem that you feel may be causing you anxiety, a problem solving approach may help.

# Understanding anxiety

A good way to begin is to write down a problem. Define it as clearly as you can, for example “I don’t get on with people”, is too vague, instead, “John appears to have stopped talking to me and this is worrying me” is better.

Next, write down as many possible solutions as you can. It doesn’t matter how silly you think the solutions are, the point is to think of as many as you can. Try to think how you have solved similar problems in the past. Ask a friend what they might do, what you might advise a friend to do if they had the same problem, e.g. possible solutions:

- Ask John what is wrong.
- Check with others if he’s not talking to them.
- Tell yourself, “so what if John’s not talking?”



# Problem

Have a go at writing down a problem that may be making you anxious.



# Solution

Now see if you can list as many possible solutions as you can.

Choose what seems like the best solution and write down all the steps it would take to achieve that solution. Who might help? What might go wrong? Often it is helpful to think, "What is the worst thing that could happen?" If you can think of a plan to cope with this, your anxiety might reduce.

If you are coming up with a plan to tackle a problem that's been worrying you for a while, it is helpful to discuss this with someone else whose opinion you value.

# Stress - general tips

Life is often stressful, and it is easy for pressures to build up. We can't always control the stress that comes from events around us but we can find ways to reduce the pressure we put on ourselves:

- Try to identify situations you find stressful by noticing the beginnings of tension, for example tightness in the back of your neck or clenching your fists.
- Take steps to tackle what it is about these situations that you find stressful.
- Make sure you have time for things you enjoy. Try to do something you find relaxing each day, e.g: drawing, reading, watching TV, exercising, or meditating.
- Talk to friends and family as much as you feel possible.

# Stress - general tips

- Try and make sure you get the right amount of sleep. See our self help guide on sleeping disorders.
- Try and eat a well balanced diet.
- Take regular exercise.
- Learn to relax.
- Try to think of future goals and consider what is important for you in the future. Having goals can make you feel like your life has meaning and can reduce stress.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Relaxation

In order to reduce the severity of physical symptoms it is useful to recognise the early signs of tension.

Once you have noticed this, you can prevent anxiety becoming too severe by using relaxation techniques.

Some people can relax through exercise, listening to music, watching TV, or reading a book.

For others it is more helpful to have a set of exercises to follow. Some might find yoga helpful.

Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned, and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension and anxiety.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Deep muscle relaxation

It is helpful to read the instructions first and to learn them eventually. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with.

Lie down, on the floor or on the bed, get comfortable, close your eyes.

Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in two-three and out two-three. Say the words calm or relax to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax.

You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Deep muscle relaxation

Starting with your hands, clench one fist tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand, saying relax in your mind. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop. Do the same with the other hand. Then move to the forearms, the biceps, the shoulders, the neck and so on until you have tensed and relaxed as many muscle groups as you can think of.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Deep muscle relaxation

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Enjoy the sensation.

It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:

 Hands - clench fist, then relax.

 Arms - bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Deep muscle relaxation

 Neck - press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.

 Face - there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.

 Chest - take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.



# Deep muscle relaxation

- ▢ Stomach - tense your stomach muscles as tight as you can and relax.
- ▢ Buttocks - squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.
- ▢ Legs - straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes.

## To make the best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practice daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.
- Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, e.g. breathing slowly.

Develop a more relaxed way of dealing with life.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Controlled breathing

Over-breathing: it is very common when someone becomes anxious for changes to occur in their breathing. They can begin to gulp air, thinking that they are going to suffocate, or can begin to breathe really quickly. This means they end up with too much carbon-dioxide in their body. This has the effect of making them feel dizzy and therefore more anxious.

Try to recognise if you are doing this and slow your breathing down. Getting into a regular rhythm of in - two-three and out -two-three will soon return your breathing to normal. Some people find it helpful to use the second hand of a watch to time their breathing. Other people have found breathing into a paper bag or cupped hands helpful. For this to work you must cover your nose and mouth. It takes at least three minutes of slow breathing or breathing into a bag, for your breathing to return to normal.



# Reducing physical symptoms

## Distraction

If you take your mind off your symptoms you will find that the symptoms often disappear. Try to look around you. Study things in detail, look at your surroundings, try to talk to people. Again, you need to distract yourself for at least three minutes before symptoms will begin to reduce.

Whilst relaxation, breathing exercises and distraction techniques can help reduce anxiety it is vitally important to realise that anxiety is not harmful or dangerous. Even if we did not use these techniques, nothing awful would happen. Anxiety cannot harm us, but it can be uncomfortable. These techniques can help reduce this discomfort.

# **Altering your thoughts related to anxiety**

## **Controlling your anxious thoughts**

We have seen the role that thoughts have in keeping going the vicious circle of anxiety. Sometimes there may also be pictures in your mind.

For example, imagine you are exercising one day. All of a sudden you get a pain in your chest and feel breathless. The thought goes through your mind, "I'm having a heart attack". This thought is, very frightening, and so your heart starts to beat faster which makes you think "there really must be something wrong with my heart". You may very well have a picture of yourself ending up in hospital. Think about the following questions and write down the answers:

1. What are the thoughts that most often go through your mind when you feel anxious?
2. Do you have any pictures of what might happen?
3. Are there any thoughts that make you feel worse?

# Altering your thoughts related to anxiety

It isn't always that easy to know what thoughts are making your anxiety worse.

The sort of thoughts that make people anxious can come and go in a flash, and may be so much of a habit that they are automatic. They may be so familiar that they just feel like part of you.

Try to imagine the last time you felt very anxious. Try to run through it like a film, in as much detail as you can. See if you can write down any frightening thoughts now. No thought is too small or too silly. Even "oh no" or "here we go again" can increase tension and anxiety.

# Altering your thoughts related to anxiety

Frightening thoughts:

Once you know what it is you are thinking, you can begin to fight back, and break the circle.

In particular, ask yourself:

- Am I exaggerating, e.g. “everything is bound to go wrong it always does”.
- Am I jumping to conclusions, e.g. “I have a pain in my chest therefore it must be my heart”.
- Am I predicting the future? e.g. “I know I’m not going to be able to cope”.

Use these questions to help yourself answer back. A good way of doing this is to write two columns - one for your thoughts that make you anxious, and the other for a more balanced thought.

# Altering your thoughts related to anxiety

Anxious thought	Balanced thought
The dizzy feeling means I'm going to faint.	I have had it many times before and I have not fainted. I have fainted once and it felt really different.
I'm going mad.	I have not gone mad yet, and the doctor tells me anxiety is not madness.

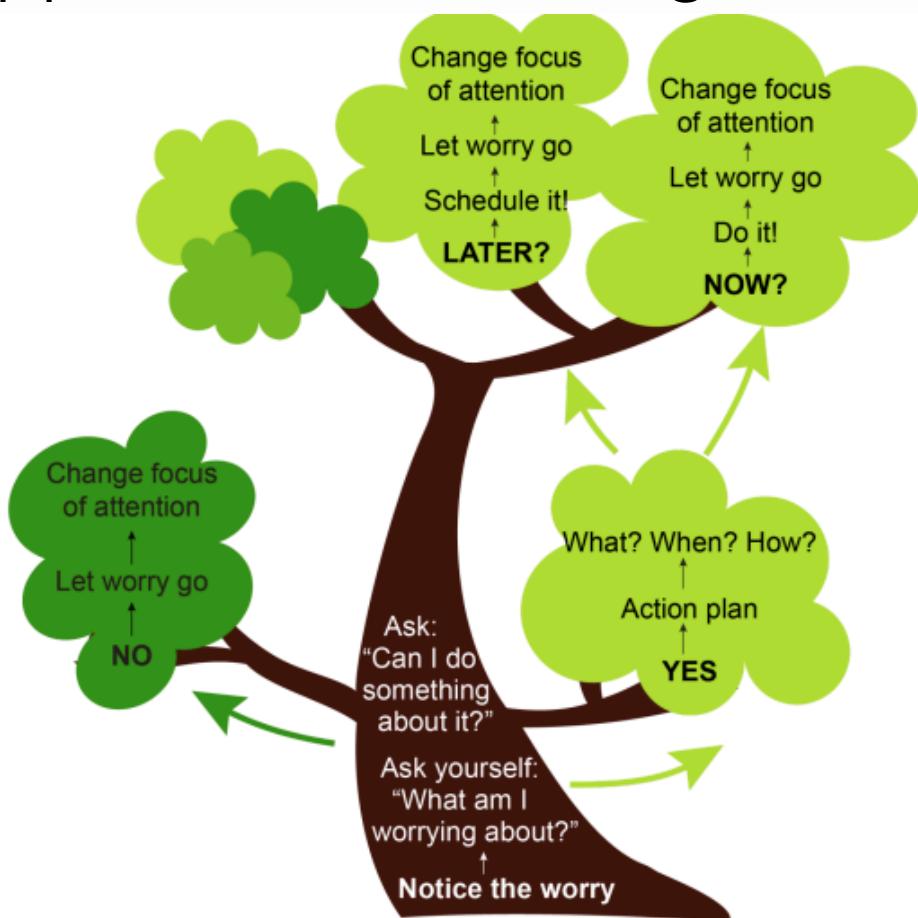
Write down some of your thoughts now and write as many answers as you can. This question might also help. What would you say to a friend who was thinking that way?

The aim is to get faster at catching these anxious thoughts and answering back almost instantly. It takes a lot of practice, but really does work.

# Altering your thoughts related to anxiety

## Worry management:

If you find that upsetting thoughts are going round and round in your mind, without leading to any solutions and making you feel very anxious, you may be able to use the following approaches to manage these worries.



## The Worry Tree

This worry tree allows you to think how to begin to manage worries - follow steps from the base of the tree.

# Altering your thoughts related to anxiety

-  The first step, at the bottom of the tree, is to notice the worry. Ask yourself "What am I worrying about?" and "Can I do something about it?"
-  If you decide you can't do anything about it, follow the branch which tells you to let the worry go and change the focus of your attention.
-  If you decide you can do something about it, follow the branch which tells you to make an action plan to include what you can do, when, and how you will do it. The next step, to the top of the tree, is to decide whether you are going to do that now or later.
-  If it's now, do it, let the worry go and change the focus of your attention.
-  If you decide it's later then schedule a time, let the worry go and change the focus of your attention.

# **Challenge your beliefs about the value of worry**

If you are a worrier then you may struggle to let worry go because some of the following beliefs. You may need to challenge them:

**Worrying makes me prepared and helps to problem solve.**

Remind yourself of the worry tree and begin to problem solve more effectively.

**Worrying can motivate me.**

Worry and anxiety can actually demotivate and reduce focus.

**Worrying keeps me safe and prepares you for bad things happening.**

You may spend a lot of time and emotion focused on things that will never happen.

**Worrying shows that I am caring.**

Challenge this by reminding yourself there are other more helpful ways of showing you care. People can be caring but do not wo

## Challenge your beliefs about the value of worry

Finally, it can really help to limit the amount of time that you worry. It allows you to feel more in control of your worry if you put aside a small amount of '**worry time**' each day. In worry time, say thirty minutes each evening, you focus on worries, problem solve, then put them aside. This means that that when worries come in to your head at any time of the day you can plan to think about them only in your 'worry time'. Once you have decided to do this, your focus can shift back on to the here and now.

# Mindfulness

This is a slightly different approach to managing anxiety. Mindfulness is a form of meditation that involves being totally in the present moment. It involves observing what is happening with a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is to concentrate only on what is happening in the here and now, not the past and not the future. We know that worrying about the past and the future is a major problem for anxious people. Studies show that practicing mindfulness can help reduce worry and anxiety.

See our audio resources: Mindfulness of breath, peaceful place.

# Mindfulness

The following mindful breathing exercise may be useful:

- Find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed or lowered and your back straight.
- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Notice the natural, gentle rhythm of your breathing as you breathe in and out, and focus only on this.
- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the mind does. Just notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You may notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, but again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.

# Mindfulness

-  Don't follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts and feelings to be there. Just notice them, and let them drift on by; bringing your attention back to your breathing.
-  Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note this has happened, and then gently bring your attention back to your breathing.
-  Thoughts will enter your awareness, and your attention will follow them. No matter when it happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. If you are very distracted it might help to say 'in' and 'out' as you breathe.

# Changing behaviour related to anxiety

- Try to notice when you are avoiding things and when you can try to tackle these fears, not all at once but in a gradual way.
- Set yourself very small goals.
- Write down your goals that you would like to tackle.
- Start with the easiest first and tick off any activity you achieve.

# **Changing behaviour related to anxiety**

People often get into the habit of leaving from situations that make them anxious. Instead of leaving try gradually to increase how long you stay in a situation that makes you anxious. Anxiety often reaches a peak, then starts to go away naturally. If you stay in an anxious situation what do you predict will happen to your anxiety? People often think it will just keep getting worse and worse. This is not the case. It will start to come down.

Try to do things to test out whether your anxious thoughts are realistic? e.g. "would I really faint if I didn't leave?"

# Changing behaviour related to anxiety

People not only avoid situations and try to leave, they also often do things to make themselves feel more safe, e.g. hanging on to something, lying down, checking. These safety behaviours may help at the time, but they also help to keep the anxiety going because the anxious person never learns that nothing awful would have happened. For example, if someone hangs onto a rail to stop themselves collapsing, they may believe they would have collapsed had the rail not been there. Also, imagine how frightening it would be if no rail was available to hold on to.

It really is very important to recognise that the more you avoid something, the more difficult it will seem to overcome, which will in turn make you more anxious.

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## **Useful books**

**Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway** (Revised edition)

Susan Jeffers

**Managing Anxiety: A Training Manual**

Helen Kennerley, Oxford University Press 1995

**Overcoming Worry and Generalised Anxiety Disorder**: (2nd edition)

Kevin Meares and Mark Freeston, Robinson 2015

**Self Help for your Nerves: Learn to relax and enjoy life again by overcoming stress and fear**

Dr Claire Weeks, Harpercollins 1995

**The Feeling Good Handbook**

David D Burns, Penguin 1999