

# Managing anxiety

Ways to cope and  
where to get support



## Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.

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# About this guide

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Most of us know what it's like to feel anxious sometimes, but if it goes on too long, it can stop you living life to the full. Although the experience of anxiety is common in older people, anxiety isn't an inevitable part of ageing. It can be managed and there are treatments available.

This guide explains what anxiety is and why you may be affected. It looks at where you can get support and suggests ways you can help yourself or someone else.

We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout.

In this guide you'll find references to our other free publications. You can order them by calling **0800 319 6789** or visiting [independentage.org/publications](https://independentage.org/publications).

# What is mental health?

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Your mental health describes your emotional wellbeing – how you think and feel, and how you deal with everyday stresses. It's just as important as your physical health and, like your physical health, it can get better or worse over time. Your mental health can change with your situation and as you move into different stages of your life.

If you do experience anxiety, you're not alone. Anxiety affects around one in 10 older people. It's important to talk about how you feel and seek help.

## What is anxiety?

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Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear that doesn't go away. Everyone feels anxious sometimes, especially in stressful situations, but when the feeling is very strong or it continues for a long time, it can stop you doing things and affect your health.

Anxiety is the main symptom of a range of conditions, which include general anxiety disorder (GAD), panic attacks, phobias and social anxiety. Feeling anxious is very common in older people. It may be something you've experienced throughout your life or, more unusually, something you're experiencing for the first time. If this is the case, it may be a symptom of another illness. Speak to your GP if you have any concerns.

Anxiety can make it hard to go about your daily life and you may find it difficult to look after yourself. It can also have an impact on your relationships. It may stop you trying new things and enjoying yourself.

## What causes anxiety?

There are many reasons why you might be affected and there may be a combination of factors. Some people are naturally anxious. You may have inherited it in your genes and if a close family member has an anxiety disorder, there is a chance you will too. If you have a learning disability, you may be more susceptible.



Some of the life changes that may happen as you get older can increase your feelings of anxiety, such as:

- a physical illness – for example, thyroid disease or a painful long-term condition such as arthritis
- a mental health condition like depression
- taking certain medications
- retirement
- feeling a lack of purpose in life
- finding it more difficult to do the things you used to do
- loneliness
- bereavement and loss
- money problems
- feeling more vulnerable as you get older – at risk of scams, for example
- becoming a carer.

Anxiety can sometimes be the result of alcohol or drug misuse. Even caffeine or too much sugar can make some people feel more anxious.



Anxiety can also be the result of a trauma or an experience of abuse or mistreatment. If you are affected by anxiety, see chapter 4 for where you can get help.

## Anxiety and depression

Some of the symptoms of depression and anxiety overlap, and the treatments are similar. It's not unusual to have both. See our guide **Dealing with depression** for more information about the symptoms of depression and ways to cope.

## Anxiety and dementia

Anxiety can be part of dementia and may be accompanied by changes in behaviour, such as agitation, not wanting to be left alone, pacing, feeling restless and fidgeting. If you're worried, speak to your GP or contact the Alzheimer's Society for advice ([0300 222 1122](tel:03002221122), [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)).

## How you might feel

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Anxiety can cause both physical and psychological symptoms, which vary from person to person. Symptoms also depend on the condition you have. There are three main kinds:

- **generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)** – you will probably feel some of the symptoms of anxiety most of the time (see page 9)
- **phobias** – if your anxiety is about one specific thing, it's more likely to be a phobia. You will know what causes it and it may make you avoid certain situations. For example, agoraphobia is a fear of going where there are other people, so it can stop you leaving your home
- **panic attacks** – these are sudden and unpredictable. They can be quite frightening but don't usually last very long.

## Recognising the signs

You may feel some of the following:

- worried all the time
- tired
- unable to concentrate
- irritable
- unable to sleep
- depressed.

You may also experience physical sensations such as:

- fast or irregular heartbeats (palpitations)
- feeling tense and uptight
- sweating
- pins and needles
- dry mouth
- trembling
- dizziness
- feeling sick (nausea)
- your stomach churning.

These physical sensations happen because your body senses fear and prepares itself for an emergency, known as the 'fight or flight' response.

For some people, worrying about the physical symptoms of anxiety can become a vicious circle. You may start to believe that they are the symptoms of a serious physical illness and worry more, so your anxiety becomes worse.

**Know that it will pass. I've suffered from panic attacks and have learned to breathe and distract myself until the moment passes.**

## When to seek help

Anxiety can become a mental health problem if you can't control your feelings and you start to withdraw from people or avoid the things that make you feel anxious. For example, if you have a fall, you might become anxious about going out on your own and stop going out. This could make you more fearful and you could lose contact with your friends.

**Your head plays games with you.  
All these thoughts are going round  
and round.**

Many people who experience anxiety never ask for help, yet there are effective treatments and strategies to help you cope. If your symptoms have been going on for several weeks or you feel that they're taking over your life, contact your GP or local mental health services. See chapter 4 for details of where you can get support.

Some people use smoking, alcohol or recreational drugs to ease the symptoms of anxiety, but this can make your anxiety worse in the long term and affect your general health and wellbeing. Speak to your GP or a support organisation if you need help – see chapter 4 or our guide **Coping with alcohol and drug misuse**.

## Where to get support

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It's not unusual to feel anxious, especially if you've been going through a difficult time. The feeling may pass but if it doesn't, it's a good idea to seek help. Anxiety can improve, no matter how long you've been affected.

### Talk to your GP

The first step is to see your GP. They can check your general health to make sure there isn't a physical cause for your anxiety. You may be asked to complete a questionnaire about when you feel nervous, anxious or worried. Your GP should then discuss treatment options with you. These could include talking therapies, relaxation therapy, medication or a combination of these. If you have another problem, such as depression or alcohol misuse, you might need treatment for that first.

**Sometimes GPs are busy or not sympathetic. It's important to persevere if it takes time to find the right help. Don't suffer alone in silence or give up.**

If going to the doctor makes you feel anxious, ask for a telephone appointment or find out if they do home visits. You can also refer yourself for some psychological therapies if you prefer – see page 15.

Some medications can cause anxiety. If you're already on medication, ask your GP or pharmacist for a Medicines Use Review. Our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions** has more advice to help you manage your condition.

If you need to speak to someone urgently, contact NHS 111 or the Samaritans ([116 123](tel:116123), [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)).



## Getting support that meets your needs

If you have particular needs because of your cultural or religious background, ask your GP to make sure that you're referred to services that can meet those needs.

You have a right to receive information in an accessible format if you need it – for example, large print, audio or Braille – or to get support from a British Sign Language interpreter.

The NHS must try to make it easy for people with a learning disability to use health services, by offering longer appointments or information in easy read, for example. Contact the Mencap Learning Disability Helpline for more information ([0808 808 1111](tel:0808808111), [mencap.org.uk](https://www.mencap.org.uk)).



## Advocacy

If you're finding it difficult to get the support you need, you may benefit from the help of an independent advocate. Ask your local council for details of advocacy services in your area or contact Mind ([0300 123 3393](tel:03001233393), [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)) or the Older People's Advocacy Alliance ([opaal.org.uk](http://opaal.org.uk)). In some situations, you may have a legal right to an advocate. For more information, see our factsheet **Independent advocacy**.

## How is anxiety treated?

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for anxiety. This is a talking therapy and it can help you understand how the way you think affects your anxiety and sometimes causes it. You'll learn strategies to help you cope when you feel anxious.

You may be offered CBT in a group or one-to-one. You may also be offered online CBT or self-help books – see chapter 5 for more on ways to help yourself.

NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services are open to all adults and you can call them direct if you wish – you don't need a referral. They offer talking therapies

to help with anxiety and depression. You can find contact details at [nhs.uk/service-search/Psychological-therapies-\(IAPT\)/LocationSearch/10008](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/Psychological-therapies-(IAPT)/LocationSearch/10008) or ask your local Healthwatch for information ([0300 068 3000](tel:03000683000), [healthwatch.co.uk](https://www.healthwatch.co.uk)).



## Find a private therapist

Waiting lists for NHS talking therapies can be long and you may only be offered a short course of treatment. If you can, you might prefer to organise private therapy. Costs vary so it's worth looking around. Ask your GP for recommendations. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has a searchable directory of therapists ([01455 883300](tel:01455883300), [bacp.co.uk/search/therapists](https://bacp.co.uk/search/therapists)) or you can find a CBT therapist on the online CBT register ([cbtregisteruk.com/Default.aspx](https://cbtregisteruk.com/Default.aspx)). Make sure the therapist is accredited by a professional body such as the BACP.

You could also contact charities that offer support, such as Anxiety UK ([03444 775 774](tel:03444775774), [anxietyuk.org.uk](https://anxietyuk.org.uk)) and No Panic ([0844 967 4848](tel:08449674848), [nopanic.org.uk](https://nopanic.org.uk)). They may charge for some of their services. If you're working, your employer may offer a service such as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

## Relaxation therapy

Relaxation therapy involves meeting a trained therapist for one hour a week over a three-month period. They will teach you how to relax your muscles in a particular way when you're in situations that make you anxious.



## Medication

If psychological therapy doesn't work or your symptoms are severe, you may be offered medication. Some can be taken long term, such as certain anti-depressants. However, some medications like sedatives can be addictive and should only be used for a short time. If you have any concerns, speak to your GP or pharmacist.

## Help with other problems

If you're finding it difficult to look after yourself, make sure you're getting enough support. Start by asking your local council for a care needs assessment, which will work out what your care needs are and how they might be met. You can find contact details in the phone book or at [gov.uk/apply-needs-assessment-social-services](https://www.gov.uk/apply-needs-assessment-social-services). Our factsheet **First steps in getting help with your care needs** has more details.

If you're a carer, our guide **Caring for someone** has information about the practical, emotional and financial support available to help you in your caring role.

If you're worried about a specific problem or you've been through a difficult situation, there may be a specialist organisation that can help. For example:

- Cruse Bereavement Care ([0808 808 1677](tel:08088081677), [cruse.org.uk](https://www.cruse.org.uk)) – or see our guide **Coping with bereavement**
- Relate for relationship advice ([0300 100 1234](tel:03001001234), [relate.org.uk](https://www.relate.org.uk))
- support groups for alcohol or drug dependency such as Alcoholics Anonymous ([0800 917 7650](tel:08009177650), [alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)) or Narcotics Anonymous ([0300 999 1212](tel:03009991212), [ukna.org](https://www.ukna.org)). See our guide **Coping with alcohol and drug misuse**.

## If you're worried about money

If money worries are making you feel anxious, make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Call our Helpline ([0800 319 6789](tel:08003196789)) for a benefits check or try our benefits calculator ([independentage.org/benefit-calculator](https://independentage.org/benefit-calculator)). If you're online, you could also visit the Mental Health and Money Advice service for advice and help ([mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org/en](https://mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org/en)).

For debt advice, contact Stepchange ([0800 138 111](tel:0800138111), [stepchange.org](https://stepchange.org)) or National Debtline ([0808 808 4000](tel:08088084000), [nationaldebtline.org](https://nationaldebtline.org)). See our **Moneywise** guide for ways to boost your income and save money.



# Ways to help yourself

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There are many things you can do to help yourself, whether or not you're getting help elsewhere.

## Talk about it

It can be really helpful to talk to someone you trust who is a good listener. If there isn't anyone you feel you can talk to, you could try contacting a helpline such as The Silver Line, a free, confidential helpline for older people (**0800 4 70 80 90**, [thesilverline.org.uk](https://thesilverline.org.uk)) or the Samaritans (**116 123**, [samaritans.org](https://samaritans.org)).

Sometimes it helps to talk to people who have been through similar experiences. They will understand what you're going through and may be able to share ways to cope. Contact mental health charities such as Rethink (**0300 5000 927**, [rethink.org](https://rethink.org)) or Mind (**0300 123 3393**, [mind.org.uk](https://mind.org.uk)). They can put you in touch with local support groups or you may be able to join an online forum.

If there isn't a support group in your area, you could consider starting one. You may get help with funding and to set one up. Contact Rethink for more information (see above).

## Write it down

**Make a note of three positive things every day, no matter how small.**

Keeping a diary may help you to spot patterns and identify the things that cause you to feel anxious, so you can manage your anxiety better. Make a note of the things that are troubling you. It's also a good idea to record the things that make you feel happy and coping strategies that have worked for you.





## Self-help therapies

These are therapies that you can do at home in your own time. For anxiety, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends therapies that are based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). They include things like guided self-help, where you work through a workbook, or free online courses such as NHS Moodzone ([nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/#](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/#)), Living Life to the Full skills courses ([lltff.com](https://www.lltff.com)) or Every Mind Matters ([nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters)).

You can also find useful apps (applications that you can download) and tools on the NHS website ([nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health](https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health)). There may be a charge for some of these.

There are many self-help books that could help you deal with your anxiety, such as Reading Well Books on Prescription ([readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-well](https://www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-well)). Ask your GP or your local library for recommendations.

Recovery Colleges offer free courses for people with mental health problems, which are designed to help you manage your own recovery and mental health. Contact Mind for more information and to find out if there's one near you ([0300 123 3393, mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)).

## Look after yourself

It's important to take care of your general health.

- Try to stay active. Regular light exercise can help to relieve stress and improve your mood.
- Get enough sleep. If you're having problems with this, try changing your routine. Follow the self-help tips on [nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia) or speak to your GP.
- Eat a healthy diet and cut down on sugar.
- Avoid caffeine, smoking and alcohol as these can all increase your anxiety. Contact NHS Smokefree National Helpline for help to stop smoking ([0300 123 1044](tel:03001231044), [nhs.uk/smokefree](https://www.nhs.uk/smokefree)).
- Learn relaxation techniques and breathing exercises to help you to feel calmer. You can find breathing exercises for stress on the NHS website ([nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress)).

**When I'm feeling really anxious I try to sit down, close my eyes and breathe in through my nose for five seconds then let it out through my mouth for five seconds. Repeating that for a few minutes can help.**

- Try yoga or pilates to help you unwind.
- Listen to relaxation podcasts or CDs.
- Complementary therapies, such as aromatherapy, massage and meditation, can be effective.



**I've taken up yoga, not only to get more exercise, but concentrating on the moves and balancing during the class helps take my mind off other worries. I really look forward to having an hour each week where I can have peace of mind from the day-to-day stresses.**

Mindfulness is a technique that some people find helpful ([mind.org.uk/mindfulness](https://www.mind.org.uk/mindfulness)). It's a way to stay connected to the present moment by focusing on what's going on inside and around you. If possible, do it with a trained professional rather than by yourself and get advice from your GP or therapist before you try it. Mindfulness isn't recommended if you suffer from social anxiety.

**Get out in the fresh air and try and notice what you see around you and appreciate it.**

## **Try to manage your worries**

Rather than worrying all the time, set aside about 10 to 15 minutes a day as 'worry time'. If you start to worry at other times, tell yourself to wait.

During your worry time, don't try to come up with solutions – just worry. Time yourself and don't let the worrying go on when your worry time is up.

**Although they are designed for children, I have a Guatemalan worry doll and it can be useful to tell it my worries at night, then put it under my pillow when I go to bed.**

## Confront your fears

If you avoid situations that make you feel anxious, this can make the problem worse. Make a list of the situations that you avoid and rank them in order of difficulty. Work out small steps to help yourself tackle them, starting with the one that causes you least anxiety, and keep confronting the situation. Your confidence will grow the more you do this.

## Stay connected

Loneliness and social isolation can increase your anxiety. Try to stay in touch with people – they can help you see things differently. Find ways to increase your social connections, such as doing a course or taking up a new hobby. Doing things you enjoy can help take your mind off your worries.

**Helping others helps me. It makes me feel good.**

You could also consider asking for regular phone calls or visits from a volunteer from Independent Age – or even sign up as a volunteer yourself. Helping others is good for your mental health and many organisations need volunteers. Contact Independent Age for more information (**0800 319 6789**, [www.independentage.org/get-support](http://www.independentage.org/get-support)). Our guide **If you're feeling lonely** has more ideas for staying connected.

**Get out of the house every day if you can. Do gardening. Volunteer at a community garden if you haven't got one of your own or at a local wildlife area.**

Spending time in nature for just a couple of hours a week can really help your health and wellbeing. Contact your local Mind to ask about ecotherapy programmes, which involve doing outdoor activities such as gardening, conservation or arts and crafts ([0300 123 3393](tel:03001233393), [mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds)) or ask your GP if there is one in your area they can refer you to.





# How to help someone you're worried about

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If you're concerned about somebody who seems to be suffering from anxiety, there are some simple things you can do to help.

- Talk to the person and find out how they feel.
- Ask them how you can help. For example, you might be able to help them with breathing exercises. Resist the temptation to give advice.
- Reassure them that you are there if they need you.
- Learn about anxiety and the treatments available. You could help them to research support organisations or self-help therapies.
- Anxiety is different for everyone. Learn to recognise the signs and find out what triggers their anxiety. Help them to stay positive and create coping strategies.
- If they suffer from panic attacks, find out what to do when this happens.
- Be patient and support them to do things they otherwise might avoid.
- Don't put them under pressure. Take things slowly and at a pace that suits them.

- Don't let anxiety become the main focus of your relationship. Encourage them to do things they enjoy. Look for activities outside the house that can help to distract them. You may want to find something you can do together, such as exercise, an art class or gardening.



If their anxiety is affecting their daily life, encourage them to see their GP or talk to a therapist. You could help by arranging appointments or offering to go with them. Help them plan what to say by using the medical appointment planner in our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions**.

## Take care of yourself

It can be difficult to care for someone who suffers from anxiety, no matter how understanding you are. It's important to look after yourself as well. Talk to your GP if you're finding it stressful and try not to take on too much.

Talking to others who are in a similar situation can be helpful. Carers UK has an online forum and may be able to put you in touch with a local support group ([0808 808 7777](tel:08088087777), [carersuk.org/help-and-advice/get-support/local-support](https://carersuk.org/help-and-advice/get-support/local-support)). See our guide **Caring for someone** for details of other support available.

You could also contact the Mind Infoline for advice ([0300 123 3393](tel:03001233393), [mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines)). Support organisations such as Anxiety UK ([03444 775 774](tel:03444775774), [anxietyuk.org.uk](https://anxietyuk.org.uk)) or No Panic ([0844 967 4848](tel:08449674848), [nopic.org.uk](https://nopic.org.uk)) can also offer advice and support.

## Alice, 84

"I've felt anxious for a long time, but I think I coped with it better when I was younger. In those days I was quite busy: I was bringing up a family, going out to work and caught up in day-to-day life. All of that distracted me from how I was feeling.

"Now I'm older, sometimes I feel that my anxiety overtakes me. I find it hard to get going in the house and get the cleaning done. Then I look round at how messy it is and feel worse.

"I feel most anxious when I have to attend something social. There are things in the past that I've enjoyed and now I hate going to them. It's anything to do with meeting people or going to a new place. I can't pinpoint exactly why I'm feeling this, but the anxiety seems to take over.

"I told my doctor how anxious I was feeling. He suggested I see a counsellor and recommended someone. I found it incredibly difficult to talk about my feelings. I think they are deeply buried. But the counsellor was a lovely man and so kind.

"I would suggest to anyone who is feeling anxious that they should get help. I've always talked to my daughters about how I'm feeling and it's so important to talk. You may have to wait to see a counsellor but it's worth seeing one if counselling will lift your anxiety even slightly, as it did for me.

"I've found that what really helps me when I feel anxious is music. I've always loved music, ever since I was a young girl. Just listening to a piece of music I love calms me. Music is such a solace. There are so many things that could help, and this is what helps me."



Picture posed by model

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The information in this guide applies to England only.

If you're in Wales, contact Age Cymru ([0800 022 3444](tel:08000223444), [ageuk.org.uk/cymru](http://ageuk.org.uk/cymru)) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland ([0800 12 44 222](tel:08001244222), [ageuk.org.uk/scotland](http://ageuk.org.uk/scotland)).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI ([0808 808 7575](tel:08088087575), [ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland](http://ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland)).

We want the UK to be the best place to grow older and we have ambitious targets to increase the number of older people we help and the difference we make. We receive no state funding and rely on income from individuals, trusts and other sources to continue providing our services to hundreds of thousands of older people in need.

Visit [independentage.org](http://independentage.org) to make a secure online donation and find out about other ways to support us. Alternatively, you can call us on [020 7605 4223](tel:02076054223) or email [supporters@independentage.org](mailto:supporters@independentage.org)



## About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That's why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we're independent so you can be.

For more information, visit our website **[independentage.org](http://independentage.org)**

Call us for information or to arrange free, impartial advice from an adviser. Lines are open 8.30am – 6.30pm Monday to Friday. Freephone **0800 319 6789** or email **[advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org)**



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