

Patient information

Anxiety

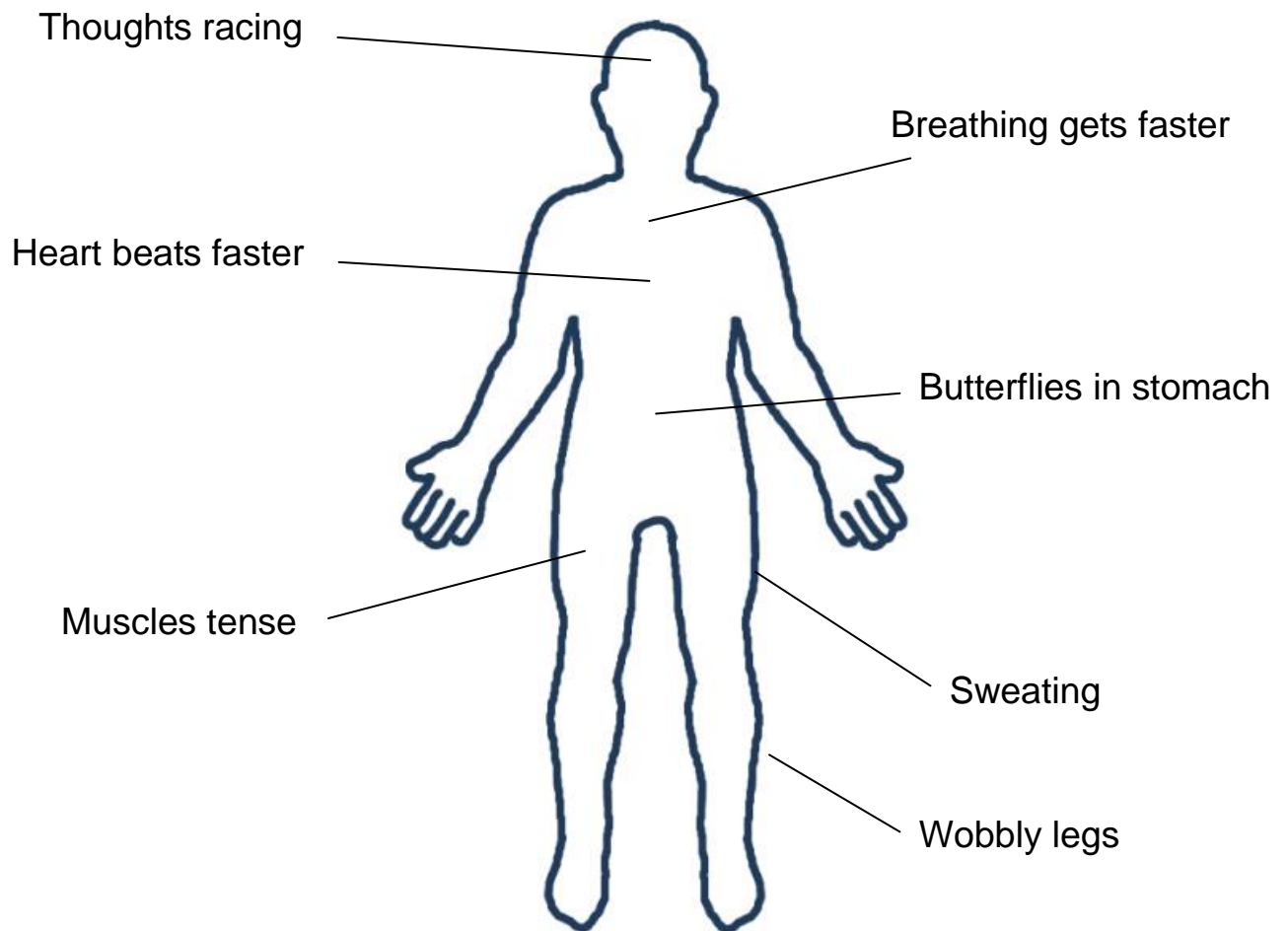
Information for young people and parents

This leaflet has been developed to help people understand what anxiety is, its effect on the body, and what keeps it going. It also provides strategies for managing anxiety, such as distraction and relaxation techniques, as well as strategies to help manage unhelpful or difficult thoughts.

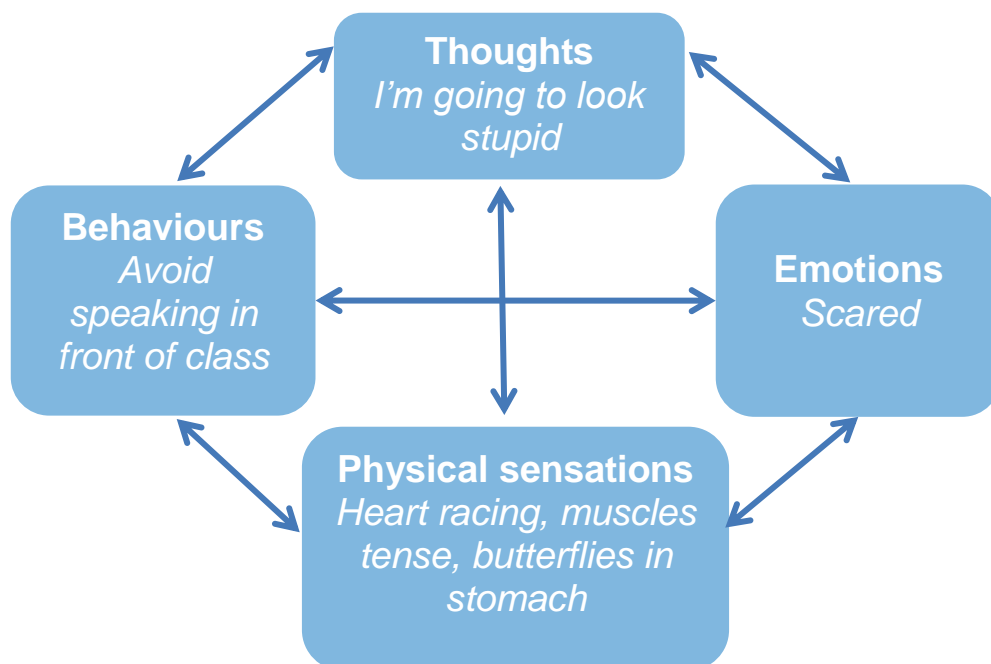
What is anxiety?

Everyone experiences anxiety in their day to day life. It is our body's natural alarm system and prepares us to cope with things we think are frightening or dangerous. Our body's response to dangers in our environment is known as the **fight or flight** response. During the fight or flight response, many changes take place to get our body ready for action. You may recognize some of your body's responses shown on the diagram on the opposite page.

This response is really useful if we are in danger. If we encountered a bear in the street it would help us to run away (**flight**) or to **fight** the bear. However, sometimes when we are worried about something, such as a test at school, or speaking in front of the class, our body thinks we are in danger and responds in the same way. These symptoms are unhelpful and can make us feel unwell.



Anxiety can also affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The physical response to anxiety (how we feel in our body), and our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, all affect each other. The diagram below shows what someone might experience when they are anxious, for example, if they had to speak in front of their class:



Our natural response when we feel anxious is to keep ourselves safe and to avoid the things that are worrying us. For the example above, this might mean the person misses school on the day of the speech, or they might ask the teacher if they can write a report instead of speaking in front of the class. This makes us feel better in the short-term. However, this may mean missing out on certain things in our lives. Someone who is scared of speaking in front of the class may not get the help they need in school because they don't speak out when they are stuck. Avoiding certain situations can also make anxiety worse in the long-term. This is because our body doesn't have the chance to learn that certain situations aren't actually dangerous. Avoidance can therefore keep the anxiety going.

Managing anxiety

There are different ways anxiety can be managed. Different strategies work best for different people. It is important to try different techniques so you can find out what works for you.

Distraction

Distraction forces our brains to think about other things so that it isn't focused on things that we find stressful or worrying. You could try:

- Counting all the red things you can see in the room.
- Making a list of your five favourite films, TV programmes, or computer games.
- Remembering the lyrics to your favourite song.
- Visualising every small detail of your house, room by room.

Some of these ideas may help, but there are lots of other ways you could distract yourself. Try and think about what might work best for you.

Relaxation techniques

Breathing exercises

One example of a breathing exercise is balloon breathing. This helps to slow our breathing, which often gets faster when we feel anxious. The steps on the next page explain how to do it.



1. Make sure you are comfortable. You can sit in a chair or lie down to do this relaxation.
2. Place one hand on your stomach.
3. Imagine there is a balloon in your stomach. Breathe in through your nose and imagine you are blowing up the balloon whilst you breathe in.
4. Pause for a second, and then breathe out slowly. This time, imagine you are letting the air out of the balloon as you breathe out.

When you breathe in, try to make your hand on your stomach move outwards. This means you are taking deep breaths, and so the balloon breathing will be most effective.



This website explains lots of other deep breathing exercises. There you might find a different one that works for you:

<https://copingskillsforkids.com/deep-breathing-exercises-for-kids/>

Visualisation

Using our imagination can help us to relax. You can think about a place that you find calming. Some people like to think about lying on a beach or walking in the countryside. You can use the steps on the next page to guide you through your visualisation:



1. Imagine your dream place – it could be somewhere you have been, something you have seen in a film, or an imaginary place.
2. Imagine a picture of it and make the picture as restful and peaceful as possible.
3. Imagine you're walking through the place what can you see? What can you hear?
4. Imagine how it would feel to be there what is the weather like? Is there anyone else around you?
5. Imagine how the floor feels beneath your feet.



If you find it hard to do this by yourself, there are lots of guided visualisation scripts at the website below. You could ask a family member to read one out to you. <https://www.greenchildmagazine.com/guided-relaxation/>

Or, there are lots of guided visualisations on YouTube, which can be found by typing 'guided visualisations for children' into the search bar. Additionally, the app 'Smiling Mind' is free and has guided visualisations which you could listen to on your own.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation helps to relax our muscles when we feel tense and worried. It can also help us notice the difference between times when we are anxious and times when we are relaxed. It involves purposely tensing different parts of the body and then releasing the tension. It will take around 15 minutes to complete this relaxation.

If you have any problems with pulled muscles or broken bones, progressive muscle relaxation may not be for you. Try some of the other strategies explained in this leaflet.

1. Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down.
2. Starting with your arms and hands, clench your fists and push your arms out straight in front of you, and then let them rest by your side.
3. Repeat this step three times, focusing on the difference you feel when your muscles are tensed and when they are relaxed.
4. Then move on to the next part of your body:
 - ◇ **Legs and feet:** push your toes downwards, gently raise your legs, stretch them in front of you, and then let them rest.
 - ◇ **Stomach:** push out your stomach muscles, take a breath and hold it, then relax.
 - ◇ **Shoulders:** scrunch up your shoulders, and then let them fall.
 - ◇ **Neck:** push your head against the chair or bed.
 - ◇ **Face:** screw up your face, squeeze your eyes tightly and push your lips together, then relax your face.
5. Each time you tense a part of your body, hold the tension for five seconds before you relax.

Balloon breathing, visualisation, and progressive muscle relaxation are all relaxation techniques. Relaxation is a skill that needs to be practiced. Try to practice even when you don't feel anxious. This means you will be best prepared to use the relaxation when you do feel anxious. You could ask a family member to help you.

Mindfulness

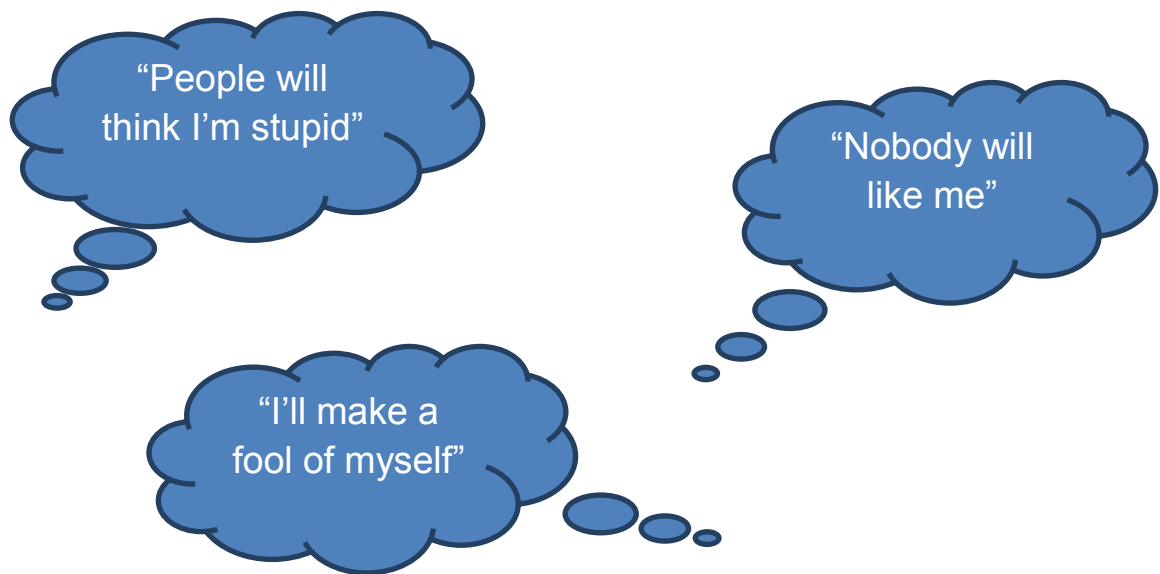
When we feel anxious we often focus on things that have happened in the past, or things we expect may happen in the future. Mindfulness is a form of meditation which involves becoming aware of what is happening in the **present moment**. This means we focus on what is happening right now, rather than focusing on the past or the future.

Mindfulness encourages us to have an **awareness** of what is happening. This means we may notice thoughts, feelings, and sensations in our body. When doing mindfulness, we try to **accept** these sensations for what they are. This means we do not try to change any of them but we notice them **non-judgementally**. Try these short exercises to help you become aware of the present moment:

1. **Mindful breathing:** you may want to set a timer for around 10 minutes before starting this exercise. Sit in a comfortable position and begin to pay attention to your breathing. Notice the air filling your lungs as you breathe in, and leaving your lungs as you breathe out. Each time your mind wanders, notice the thoughts you have, and then bring your attention back to your breathing.
2. **Body scan:** pay attention to the physical sensations throughout your body. Starting from your feet, spend around 15-30 seconds focusing on each body part. Focus on your feet, legs, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, neck and face. The goal isn't to change anything you feel in your body, or to relax, but to become more aware of it.
3. **Five senses:** work through your five senses to focus on the present moment. Notice five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Challenging unhelpful thoughts

We know that thoughts are part of the cycle which keeps anxiety going. They can impact our feelings, behaviours, and the sensations we feel in our body. When we are anxious we often have thoughts that are negative and unhelpful. They appear to be believable, but it is important to remember that they are not based on fact. Some examples of negative and unhelpful thoughts include:



The thoughts you have when you feel anxious may be similar to these, or you may experience different thoughts. Think about the thoughts you have when you are feeling anxious. If you are struggling to think of any, you may find it helpful to keep a diary where you record your anxious thoughts over a two week period.

When we have anxious thoughts like these ones, we often try not to think about them, or to push them out of our mind. Often when we try to do this, the thought just gets bigger. We can challenge thoughts by asking the following:

- Is there any evidence that goes against this thought?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?
- What would I say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?
- How will I feel about this in:
 - ◊ six months time?
 - ◊ five years time?
- Is there another way of looking at this situation?

Try and write down some unhelpful thoughts you have and then use one of the five questions above to challenge each of the thoughts.

Here are some other resources on managing anxiety that you may find useful!

- **The Source:** information and advice for young people in Suffolk www.thesource.me.uk
- **Young Minds:** national charity offering information and resources for young people about mental health www.youngminds.org.uk
- **NHS Moodzone:** offers practical advice, interactive tools, video and audio guides, for coping with stress and anxiety. www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression
- **Smiling Mind:** free mindfulness app which offers guided meditation and mindfulness exercises which are adapted for people of all ages.
- **Headspace:** mindfulness app, you can access a full version for £5.99/month or they provide limited features for free.

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (the new name for DisabledGo) <https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



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