

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is something everyone will experience at some point in their lives, in which they experience feelings of tension, fearfulness and uncertainty. These feelings in turn, can affect your ability to concentrate, sleep, as well as your appetite. Short-term anxiety however, can be useful as it can make you more alert and enhance your performance; it is when these feelings overwhelm you that you may suffer

The 'fight or flight' reflex

Anxiety is a coping mechanism to protect the body against danger or stress. Hormones, such as adrenalin are released, which causes the heart to beat faster to carry blood where it is needed most. Your breathing quickens to carry oxygen necessary for energy, and sweat is produced to avoid the body overheating. This allows the body to protect itself in dangerous situations by either running away or fighting a foe – the 'fight or flight' reflex.

What causes anxiety?

A number of factors may trigger anxiety – past issues may cause you to become anxious when a similar situation arises as well as concerns about the future and our inability to control these events. Although everyone becomes anxious at some point, a mixture of personality, past experiences and current situations may cause some people to suffer from anxiety more than others.

What are the effects of anxiety?

Anxiety has both physical and psychological effects, from headaches and nausea to feeling irritable and the inability to concentrate. These feelings may manifest themselves in the form of a panic attack (rapid / irregular heartbeat, nausea, shaky limbs, and feelings of losing control). To cope with these feelings of anxiety, some people may start smoking, drinking or misusing drugs; others may develop phobias of social situations or develop obsessive thoughts or repetitive behaviours.

Controlling the symptoms of anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety can be controlled by breathing and relaxation techniques. Some people find Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) beneficial as this encourages you to develop positive ways of thinking and to construct strategies for managing anxiety, so that you feel in control. Regular exercise, which uses up adrenalin and other hormones produced through stress and avoiding stimulants such as alcohol, coffee and cigarettes may also be beneficial

Medication such as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) or beta-blockers may be prescribed to deal with the symptoms of anxiety. Decisions regarding your treatment should be made jointly with your GP. If none of the treatments work however, your GP may refer you for specialist help through your Community Mental Health Team, who will assess you and develop a treatment plan.