



For people aged 65 or over

**Do you feel you have lost  
your confidence?  
Are you worrying about  
things often?**

If you answered yes to any of these,  
this booklet may be for you.



**A self-help booklet for older people  
affected by anxiety**

**Birmingham Healthy Minds**  
[www.birminghamhealthyminds.org](http://www.birminghamhealthyminds.org)

Take your time to read through the information and read it in sections if you are finding it difficult to concentrate or to understand.

# What is this feeling?

Feelings of worry, low confidence, fear or nerves are often called anxiety by medical professionals. Anxiety is normal and can happen with different life events or changes. In some situations anxiety is expected and can help but in some situations it can become more of a problem. It can be helpful to think of anxiety as an 'umbrella' term used to describe a lot of other feelings or emotions.



# How common is it?

Anxiety is very common and affects older people as much as it affects younger people:

- 1 in 4 adults have had anxiety.
- 1 in 5 people over the age of 65 have had anxiety in the last 6 months.

## **Anxiety can affect us in four ways:**

1. The way we feel.
2. The way we think.
3. Our body physically.
4. The way we behave or act.

Sometimes it is hard to notice anxiety because it feels similar to physical health problems that we may already have, or we could have felt this way for a long time.

**Some examples:**

*Mary is in hospital waiting to go into the operating theatre following a fall earlier in the week. She is worried about what will happen and had problems sleeping last night because she kept waking up. She doesn't feel like eating breakfast and keeps looking at the clock.*

This would be an example of normal anxiety.

*Two months ago, Mo felt dizzy when he was out shopping by himself. He has asthma and often has difficulty breathing but it hasn't made him feel dizzy before. Since then Mo has not been out to town by himself. He will only go if one of his family can go with him and he doesn't stay out for long. If Mo thinks about going into town alone he feels scared and decides it is easier not to go.*

This would be an example of anxiety that is not helpful.

# Do I have anxiety?

Tick any of the following that you experience often:

## How you feel

- Anxious
- Nervous
- Worried
- Frightened or scared

## What happens to your body

- Heart pounding or racing
- Fast breathing
- Tight chest
- Stomach churning or feeling sick
- Dry mouth
- Headaches
- Sweating or hot flushes
- Feeling dizzy
- Tense muscles
- Pins and needles in toes or fingers
- Needing to go to the toilet more

## How you think

- Worry
- Always think the worst will happen
- Can't concentrate
- Thinking "I can't cope"

## Changes to your behaviour

- Difficulty sitting still or relaxing
- Snappy or irritable
- Drink more alcohol or smoke more
- Eating more or less than normal
- Avoiding people or situations
- Checking more for safety, eg the oven or front door
- Hoarding or finding it more difficult to throw things away

If you have ticked some or most of the boxes you may be experiencing anxiety. You may find the rest of this booklet helpful to work through.

# What causes anxiety?

There are lots of things that might cause anxiety to happen. It could be one big thing or lots of small things happening. Some of the most common reasons for feeling anxious are:

- money or finance worries
- physical health problems
- family problems
- adjusting to retirement
- bereavement
- recent bad experience or scary event.

**List any of the things that you think may be affecting you:**

.....

.....

.....

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.....

# What keeps anxiety going?

Earlier in the booklet on page 3 we spoke about how anxiety can affect us in four ways; thoughts, feelings, physical feelings and behaviour. This can sometimes be referred to as the cycle of anxiety and can keep anxiety going for a long time.

Look at the example of Mo from page 4 below:

**Event:** Mo felt dizzy when he was out shopping two months ago. He needs to go into town to the post office and nobody can go with him.





# My cycle of anxiety

Think of an event or situation when you last felt anxious and write it here:

.....

.....

Using that example, fill in the boxes below starting at number 1 and using the prompts.

**Feelings**  
Anxiety

**5. Thoughts**

What were your thoughts about yourself or the situation now?

.....

.....

**1. Thoughts**

What went through your mind?  
What were your worries?

.....

.....

**4. Physical**

Did anything change in your body after your behaviour?

.....

.....

**2. Physical**

What changes did you notice in your body?

.....

.....

**3. Behaviour**

What did you do? Or what did you avoid doing?

.....

.....

# How do I manage anxiety?

We can't stop anxiety because it is a normal reaction. It is important to remember that anxiety can't hurt us but it can be uncomfortable. We can learn to manage anxiety if it happens often or if we wouldn't normally expect to feel anxious. There are three main ways we can manage anxiety:

1. Reducing the physical symptoms.
2. Changing our anxious thoughts.
3. Changing our behaviours.

## 1. Reducing the physical symptoms

We reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety by noticing them early and then using **relaxation techniques**.

Relaxation can be difficult if you already have problems with your heart or breathing, because the physical symptoms of anxiety can make them worse or increase your worry about these problems.

People relax in lots of different ways so it is important to find something that works for you. Some people relax through exercise such as walking or swimming, listening to music, watching TV or reading a book.

Write below some of the things that help you to relax, or things that have helped you to relax before:

.....

.....

Relaxation can also be done by trying a relaxation exercise. Try one of the relaxation exercises below.

If you have **muscle** or **joint problems** try the **controlled breathing** or **distraction** exercises.

If you have **breathing** or **heart difficulties** try the **deep muscle relaxation** or **distraction** exercises.

It would be helpful to read it all before trying it.

### **Controlled breathing**

Try to slow your breathing rate down. Breathe in for the count of

**one...two...three.**

And out for the count of

**one...two...three.**

Repeat this for three minutes or until you feel relaxed.

## Deep muscle relaxation

Starting from your feet try to gently tense and then relax each part of your body.

1. Start at the feet, hold for 3 seconds and relax, wiggle your feet.
2. Next try your legs, hold for 3 seconds and relax, shake your legs.
3. Next try your stomach, hold it in for 3 seconds and relax, move your body side to side.
4. Next your shoulders, hold it for 3 seconds and relax, wiggle your shoulders.
5. Next your arms, hold it for 3 seconds and relax, wiggle your arms.
6. Finally your hand, hold it for 3 seconds and relax, stretch out your hands.

## Distraction

If you try to take your mind off the symptoms they can become less or go away for the time being. Here are some distraction techniques you could try:

- If you are out look at the types of shoes people are wearing.
- Count how many cars pass your house. What colour are they?
- Try doing a puzzle or crossword.
- Begin with a number and try to count back in threes.

Do the distraction technique for at least three minutes.

## 2. Noticing and changing our anxious thoughts

If we think back to the example of Mo and his cycle of anxiety on page 8 we can see how some of our thoughts can keep our anxiety going.

In Mo's case his thoughts were:

*"I'm going to feel dizzy again."*

*"I shouldn't go because of my health."*

Anxious thoughts are different from everyday thoughts because they make us feel worse. Think of an anxious thought you have had and write it here. You might find it easier to draw the thought. Use the following page.



It can be helpful to keep a diary of our anxious thoughts so we get better at noticing when they happen.

**Look at the example of Mo’s diary:**

<p><b>What was happening when you had the thought? Where were you? Who were you with?</b></p>	<p><b>What was the thought or image?</b></p>
<p><i>“I rang my daughter to take me to the post office but she couldn’t take me. I was at home and needed to go and get some money. I was alone.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I will feel dizzy again and I might fall. If I fall people will laugh at me. I shouldn’t go because of my health.”</i></p>

Try to fill in your own diary over the next week.

<p><b>What was happening when you had the thought? Where were you? Who were you with?</b></p>	<p><b>What was the thought or image?</b></p>
<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

Once you have noticed your negative thoughts it is important to challenge them and think a more balanced thought. To challenge thoughts it can be helpful to think what advice you would give to someone else.

Look at Mo's example below:

*"I will feel dizzy again and I might fall. If I fall people will laugh at me."*

*"I shouldn't go because of my health."*

Mo challenged his thought by asking himself what advice he would give a friend. Mo's balanced thought was:

*"I didn't fall when I felt dizzy last time and I know that feeling dizzy is just my anxiety."*

*"I know this is anxiety and not my asthma."*



It can be helpful to put this in two columns. Take one of your anxious thoughts and have a go at challenging it:

<b>What was the thought or image?</b>	<b>Balanced thought</b>
<i>“I will feel dizzy again and I might fall. If I fall people will laugh at me.”</i>	<i>“I didn’t fall when I felt dizzy last time and I know that feeling dizzy is just my anxiety.”</i>

### 3. Changing our behaviours

It is important to notice when we are avoiding things because of anxiety. Sometimes we make excuses to avoid or not face a situation. If we are avoiding things because of our anxiety we should tackle our fears. This can be scary but breaking it down into small goals makes it easier and can make us feel good when we do them.

**Look at Mo's example of getting back to town:**

**Goal:**

To go into town alone and stay there for at least an hour.

**Small goals:**

Go to the local shop by myself to get milk.

Go to the post office by myself.

Go into town on the bus with a friend.

Get the bus into town alone and meet a friend there.

Get the bus into town alone and come home.

Get the bus into town alone and stay for an hour.

You can see how Mo set small goals that led up to the big goal he was avoiding. At each step it is important to reward yourself with praise, even if it is a small step.

Is there something you have been avoiding? Write it here:

.....

Can you break this down into smaller goals. You don't have to fill them all:

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....
6. ....
7. ....
8. ....
9. ....
10. ....

Set yourself a time and date to try and tackle each goal. If you find the goal difficult, repeat it until it becomes easier.

**We hope you have found this self-help booklet useful. If after completing this booklet you feel you need more help, you should talk to your GP, therapist or mental health practitioner who can tell you about what to do next.**

## Additional sources of help

### **Birmingham Healthy Minds**

Check out the BHM website ([www.birminghamhealthyminds.org](http://www.birminghamhealthyminds.org)) for useful self-help materials and links to the **NHS Choices** pages on mental health and wellbeing.

### **Age UK:** services, advice and support for older people

Advice line: 0800 169 6565

Website: [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

### **Aquarius:** for people concerned about their own, or someone else's alcohol problem.

Telephone: 0300 5555 999 or 0121 414 0888

Website: [www.aquarius.org.uk](http://www.aquarius.org.uk)

### **Birmingham Carers Helpline**

Telephone: 0121 675 8000

Website: [www.birmingham.gov.uk/carers-centre](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/carers-centre)

### **Birmingham Drug and Alcohol Action Team**

Telephone: 0800 073 0817

Website: [www.bdaat.co.uk](http://www.bdaat.co.uk)

### **Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid:** for women affected by domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Telephone: 0808 800 0028

Website: [www.bswaid.org](http://www.bswaid.org)

**Citizens' Advice Bureau**

Telephone: 08444 111 444

(new helpline number being rolled out)

Website: [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

**Cruse Bereavement Care**

Telephone: 0121 687 8010 or 0844 477 9400

Website: [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

**Emergency Refugee:** accommodation for women.

Telephone: 0800 111 4223

Website:

[www.reachthecharity.org.uk/our-services/domestic-abuse](http://www.reachthecharity.org.uk/our-services/domestic-abuse)

**National Debtline:** free expert advice.

Telephone: 0808 808 4000

Website: [www.nationaldebtline.co.uk](http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk)

**No Panic:** free phone helpline for people suffering with anxiety.

Telephone: 0800 138 8889

Website: [www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)

**Relate:** relationship counselling.

Telephone: 0121 643 1638

Website: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

**Samaritans:** 24-hour emotional support, for any problem, big or small.

Telephone: 08457 90 90 90 or (0121) 666 6644

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Survivors of bereavement by suicide**

Telephone: 0844 561 6855

Website: [www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

**The Silver Line:** helpline for older people.

Telephone: 0808 328 8888

Website: [www.thesilverline.org.uk](http://www.thesilverline.org.uk)

**Victim Support Birmingham**

Telephone: 0300 303 1977

Website: [www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)





[www.bsmhft.nhs.uk](http://www.bsmhft.nhs.uk)

Main switchboard: 0121 301 0000

**Improving mental health wellbeing**