

# Overcoming Stress and Anxiety

Serious illnesses involve new and sometimes frightening experiences not just for the patient but for their loved ones too. It introduces many uncertainties that have not been faced before. People sometimes describe this as entering a foreign land where nothing seems familiar – hospitals, doctors, tests, demanding treatments. All the familiar routines of normal daily life are turned upside down. The speed of change can feel overwhelming.

With so many changes to a person's normal life that stress is almost always one result. Even long-standing 'chronic' illnesses can cause anxiety to the patient and the people around them. Over the course of an illness people often develop a very different view of themselves and the world around them and it can take time to make sense of what has happened and what has changed, and to get used to unfamiliar people and new ways of living. While this can sometimes lead to helpful and positive changes in how people live their lives, any period of adjustment is almost always stressful.

With so many new experiences and so much uncertainty, people naturally fear what may be round the next corner. No matter what the prognosis that has been given, most people worry about the possibility that they may die and what this would mean for them and the people they love. Thinking about all these things can be emotionally exhausting and lead to high levels of stress and anxiety.

So what is anxiety and what can be done to reduce your tension levels? A lot of people assume that their level of anxiety is just the way they were made (*'I'm just highly strung', 'I've always been a worrier'*) and as a result they believe they have no control over it and cannot possibly change. However, even when we are in very distressing situations, there are things we can do to prevent ourselves from feeling overwhelmed by anxiety. In fact, *everyone* can learn to be a more calm and relaxed person; it just takes practice.

This booklet draws on scientific research into what helps people manage and overcome anxiety. Over the past fifty years, huge progress has been made in understanding stress and anxiety. Try to read through the whole booklet so that you have a better understanding of what you are experiencing and what you can do about it.

## What is Stress and Anxiety?

Consider the number of changes you have had to face over recent weeks and months, perhaps even years. The first thing to acknowledge is that any form of change usually causes stress and anxiety in people. Every person has a natural built-in fear of the unknown; it is a type of survival mechanism. Stress, worry and tension are therefore nothing more than reactions to uncertainty brought about by change. But rather than going on using the rather vague word 'stress' to describe all these reactions, from now on we'll use the word anxiety which is really another word for fear.

Before we start, it is important to remember that anxiety, or fear, is a completely normal *emotion* which is felt by everyone from time to time. Emotions are a normal and important part of being human. In fact, other animals feel fear too. First let's look at the three main elements of anxiety, and later we will go on to see what you can do to manage each of these areas better. You will probably recognise them as they are described.

**First**, there are the *physical symptoms* that you feel when you are anxious. These include such things as your heart thumping quickly, feeling hot and sweaty, feeling your legs go weak and shaky, and so on. There are a great many different physical symptoms that people feel and almost every person is slightly different in the symptoms they get. But almost everyone experiences some degree of muscle tension and it is this that we will be focusing on.

**Second**, fear usually involves *frightening thoughts*. When we have scary thoughts about the future we can make ourselves feel anxious in the present (and bring on the physical symptoms described above). But it can work both ways: when people feel their hearts thumping fast they sometimes worry that they are about to have a heart attack or to be overwhelmed by emotion, and this frightening thought can make them feel even more anxious. Fortunately, there are a number of ways in which one can practise thinking in more helpful ways.

**Finally**, our *behaviour* (what we actually do) is often affected by anxiety. We tend to avoid or escape from situations which make us feel stressed or cause us fear. For example, when we stop going out and seeing friends for a while because we are undergoing medical treatment, we can sometimes find it hard to get back to our social life because we worry (frightening thoughts) about how we will manage or worry that other people won't be pleased to see us, etc. In other words our behaviour has become affected by the way we now think. You might like to think about whether your anxiety may already be preventing you from doing some things that you would like to do. Some people try to reduce their stress levels by drinking alcohol or taking drugs, but in the long term these behaviours only add to their problems and makes them worse.

Now at this point you may be feeling that your anxiety doesn't fit into the neat pattern we have just outlined. You may feel that your anxiety is different. Well, if it contains any one of the three components above (physical symptoms, frightening thoughts or changes in behaviour) there is a good chance that the other two components are there too. You just may not have noticed them. So let's look at each component of anxiety in a bit more detail.

### **Physical Symptoms**

What happens when you clap your hands around birds? They immediately fly away. What happens when you walk up to a sheep? It runs away. The same is true of people. If we are frightened by something threatening, or sudden and unexpected, such as a loud explosion, our instinctive reaction is to run away. This does not mean that we are being cowards; it is simply that running away from possible danger is built into us, just as it is with other animals. We instinctively escape from danger and we don't stop to think about it. This *fight-or-flight* instinct has helped the species survive (only fight if you need to; you are more likely to survive by avoiding danger, even the unknown).

This helps to explain what happens in the body when we feel fear. Being an 'instinctive' response, our body immediately gets itself ready for running away: the muscles tense up because we need our muscles for running; we breathe faster so as to take in more oxygen through the lungs; the heart beats faster to pump this oxygen, through the blood stream, to the muscles; we begin to perspire more in order to keep the muscles cool while they are being used, and so on. There are many rapid changes that occur in the body. A

lot of these changes are activated by the release of a hormone called adrenaline into the bloodstream, which has the effect of ‘waking up’ the body and getting it ready for action. At the same time, energy is diverted away from unnecessary tasks in the body, like digestion (though over a long period of time this can cause problems like irritable bowel syndrome).

All these changes are quite harmless and normal, and in fact they are very important for us when we need to escape from real danger. The problem with anxiety, unlike fear, is that these changes occur when there is no immediate danger. Our bodies react *as if* we are in danger now, when in fact we may be simply facing something which, *in itself*, is harmless (e.g. talking to a doctor) or even just worrying about something that may or may not happen in the future.

So try to remember that when you feel yourself getting physically tense, your body is telling you that it thinks that you are in danger and it is trying to help you escape. This is natural but this bodily experience of fear can be alarming to us, and can lead to other problems. Later in this booklet you will learn how to keep your body as calm as possible in the face of danger, whether real or imagined.

### **Frightening Thoughts**

Human beings clearly think in a completely different way compared with other animals. We can imagine, invent, analyse, reminisce, and anticipate, etc. – no other animal can think in these ways. These ways of thinking all rely on the capacity to simulate reality in our heads (i.e. to recreate a past event, imagine an alternative scenario, predict the future); in other words we can think not only about “what is” but also “what is not” or “what might be” . Most of the time such thinking is very helpful to us, but sometimes it can lead us into problems. For example, when faced with something we have never done before we may imagine the worst. Before starting a new job we may worry that we won’t be able to cope with it. Before an exam we may imagine not being able to answer the questions, and so on. In other words, our minds can make a catastrophe out of something merely uncertain.

How we think makes a huge difference to how we *feel* and whether our bodies start to prepare for possible danger. For example, if you were alone in your home and were woken in the night by the sound of broken glass your emotional reaction would depend on how you thought about the sound you had heard. If you thought a burglar was trying to break in you would understandably react with fear. But if you thought it was merely the neighbour’s cat knocking over a milk bottle you might roll over and fall back to sleep. Your thoughts make all the difference!

The point to remember is that if we think in frightening ways we are more likely to feel the physical symptoms of anxiety. Unfortunately, when we feel anxious our ability to make sensible decisions becomes harder (this is one of the well-known effects of stress). Physical symptoms of fear (muscle tension, pounding heart etc.) can bring on frightening thoughts, and frightening thoughts can bring on those same physical symptoms. This has the potential for spiralling out of control, as it does in a panic attack. But if we can think calmly and realistically about the situation we are in, and learn to stay physically calm, we can deal with it in the best possible way. This is particularly important when faced with a life-threatening illness, when people find themselves having to cope with many new experiences, new uncertainties and, understandably, having lots of frightening thoughts.

To summarise, if we *think* frightening thoughts our bodies are more likely to prepare themselves for danger and we then start to experience the physical symptoms of anxiety that we talked about in the previous section. Later in this booklet you will learn how to become more aware of the ways in which your thinking may be contributing to keeping these unpleasant feelings going.

## **Behaviour**

If every time you spoke to your boss your heart began pounding, you sweated a lot and you felt dizzy or a little unreal (all *physical symptoms* of fear), you would soon start expecting to feel that way around your boss and you might begin to worry about the next time you would have to speak to them (*frightening thoughts*). A very understandable reaction to this situation would be for you simply to avoid your boss. This may be an effective way to avoid feeling anxious but it provides only temporary relief and in the long term is not a very convenient solution!

The big problem with avoiding people, places, situations (or sometimes even thoughts) that make us anxious is that we never give ourselves a chance to learn how to cope with them. We also never give ourselves a chance to see if the awful things that we *imagined* would happen actually do occur. In other words, avoidance tends to maintain the problem rather than solve it. Furthermore, avoidance can result in a loss of confidence and affect how you feel about yourself, and this in turn can make you feel more anxious and self-critical – another vicious circle! So later in this booklet you will learn how to change what you do and perhaps what you don't do. Some of these behaviours may be long-standing habits but, with practice, even these can change.

## **Why learn how to overcome anxiety?**

As we have seen, fear can be a useful emotion when it enables us to escape from danger. However, over a longer period of time (as when dealing with a serious illness) anxiety can become less helpful:

- The symptoms of anxiety, whilst not harmful, can be uncomfortable and use up a lot of precious energy at a time when our energy reserves may already be stretched.
- Anxiety symptoms can also be frightening in themselves, particularly if they are mistaken for symptoms of the illness or side-effects of treatment.
- Sometimes people worry that their panicky feelings are a sign of something seriously wrong with them. This worry in turn can produce more physical symptoms which of course increases the anxiety!
- Likewise, people may start to predict feeling anxious, and become frightened of fear itself, worrying that they may “lose control” or just feel terrible. This can cause the very symptoms that are feared and lead the person to avoid situations that they imagine will cause them anxiety.
- Anxiety can stop people doing what they want or need to do (such as spending valued time with friends, breathing comfortably, or simply sleeping well).

# Overcoming Stress and Anxiety

Remember that fear is not something we can or want to eliminate completely. Fear is an important emotion that we all need and which we will go on experiencing from time to time throughout the rest of our lives. But it does help to learn to manage one's fear responses.

Just like learning anything, it is important to progress one step at a time and not expect dramatic improvements without a good deal of practice. It's very much just like learning to drive: the more you practise the easier it becomes, and it's always better to take small steps regularly than to try to tackle more than you are ready for. Even if you are seeing a professional about your anxiety, they will only be able to see you for relatively short periods of time. **It will be the effort that you put in that will make the real difference.**

## Targeting your anxiety

Is your anxiety related to certain situations, places or people? Is it worse at particular times of the day? Are there things that could be done to address the particular concerns you have? One way to help you to understand your anxiety better is to keep a diary.

**Anxiety Diary** – it can really be worthwhile to keep a daily diary of your anxiety. Rate your anxiety from 0-10 (0= complete calm; 10=panic). Note down anything that seems important. Were you at work or home, who were you with, what were you doing, and what were you thinking about at the time? You may start to become more aware of situations that make you anxious or that you may be avoiding. What is your general level of stress like? This information will help you begin to tackle your anxiety.

As we have already said, there are three main components of anxiety – physical symptoms, frightening thoughts and our behaviour. All three may need to be changed in order to overcome anxiety. Let's consider the physical symptoms of anxiety first because these bodily reactions are the most primitive and instinctive.

## 1. Overcoming the Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

The aim here is to teach the body not to produce the physical symptoms of fear that were mentioned above – e.g. racing heart, feeling hot and sweaty, muscle tension, feeling dizzy etc.). Remember that the body (controlled by the brain) is instinctively producing these symptoms so as to prepare itself for running away from what it 'thinks' is a dangerous situation. What we must do is to 'reassure' the body (this more primitive part of the brain) that it is quite safe. In order to do this we must teach the body to relax in the situations that cause us tension or stress. You will have noticed that it is impossible to be both relaxed and tense at the same time. The more we associate the feared situation with being physically *relaxed*, the more this primitive part of our brains remembers not to become alarmed. It is as if our body has to teach a part of our brain to calm down, a part of our brain that we cannot reach with our thoughts alone.

## Learning to physically relax

Relaxation exercises focus on learning to **breathe more calmly** and to **relax one's muscles**. These are the two areas of the body's stress reaction that we have direct control over.

## Breathing

One of the best methods is learning to control one's breathing better by slowing it down. Despite popular belief, there is no evidence that taking lots of deep breaths helps people relax. In fact it is more likely to lead to hyperventilation ("over-breathing") and feeling out of control. However, by slowing breathing to a regular comfortable rhythm, your pulse rate and temperature come down and you start to conserve energy.

### Breathing exercise

- ◆ Sit or lie as comfortably as possible, wearing loose garments.
- ◆ Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach.
- ◆ Slowly breathe in through your nose or through pursed lips, doing your best to slow down the speed in which you take in breath.
- ◆ As you inhale, push your belly/ stomach out and feel your stomach expand with your hand.
- ◆ Slowly exhale through pursed lips to regulate the release of air while gently squeezing your tummy.
- ◆ Rest and repeat.

**Whilst relaxation and breathing exercises can help reduce anxiety it is important to remember that anxiety is not harmful or dangerous. Even if you did not use these techniques, nothing awful would happen. Anxiety cannot harm us, but it can feel very uncomfortable, even unbearable, at the time. These techniques can help reduce this discomfort.**

Try to spend time occasionally thinking about how you are breathing, and see if you can slow it down. Try thinking to yourself 'in' and 'out' as you breathe so as to help you stay focused. You may be surprised what a difference this can make. After a while you will be able to do this without anyone else realising what you are doing.

### Muscle relaxation

The other common and related method is to practise physically relaxing. Practising the skills of relaxing the muscles enables one to become less physically tense in situations that previously caused anxiety. Along with this booklet you should be given a CD of these exercises so that you can practise them at home. If not, please ask for one.

The exercises involve tensing up each muscle for a short period of time so as to 'burn off' any surface energy or tension in the muscle. You are then instructed to release slowly the tension, noticing the feeling of 'letting go' and the relaxation which follows. It is this letting go that one must learn to master, but with a little practice, many people learn to achieve a lasting sense of calm in their lives, even while facing significant challenges.

But this is only half the story. Letting go of muscle tension must become a habit, and we must learn to notice when we are not as relaxed as we could be. Many people soon realise how much tension they have carried around with them, perhaps for years, without even knowing about it.

So... as you are reading this, try to notice where your body is tense. Which muscles are you tensing up, even slightly, at this moment? Maybe your shoulders are just a little tense. Or maybe your feet. Perhaps you are frowning. These are all types of muscle tension. Now, as soon as you become aware of which muscles are tensed up, try to let this tension go. Try to let the muscles become limp and relaxed. Try to do this little exercise at different points in the day.

### How to *practise* physical relaxation exercises

**Aim to have at least one period in the day when your body can be fully relaxed.** Using the CD can help to get you started. It's worth knowing that some people find being relaxed is so unfamiliar that they don't like the 'floating' feeling, so for them being relaxed may just take a little getting used to (but don't give up!).

**Learn what it is like to feel more relaxed** so that you have something to compare yourself with at other times of the day. Relaxation exercises (such as on the CD) help you focus on the contrast between being tense and being relaxed.

**Try to get in the habit of *noticing* and physically *relaxing* your muscles.** This simple physical habit is an effective way of getting rid of pent-up stress. At first it may seem difficult to find the time, but with regular practice it becomes easier and quicker to notice and let go any tension you find in your body.

**Aim to practise letting go of your muscles until you get good at becoming deeply relaxed.** This often takes several weeks but get into the habit of checking your body for tension several times a day and just let it go.

It is generally not useful to do the exercises first thing in the morning or last thing at night (unless you experience insomnia) because these are times when the body is generally more relaxed anyway. For people who do have insomnia (sleeping problems), learning to physically relax can make an enormous difference.

To summarise, it is important to practise relaxing the body *throughout* the day. The more you practise relaxing your muscles, the easier you will find it to notice and let go tension at other times of the day.

And don't forget... try to breathe more slowly and calmly, and avoid lots of deep breaths!

## 2. Overcoming frightening thoughts

Our task here is to learn how to think more skilfully about situations that cause you anxiety. We are *not*

**IMPORTANT**  
Only do the relaxation exercises that feel comfortable. At no time should you strain your muscles to the point of pain. Do everything in a safe and gentle way.

asking you to use 'positive thinking' simply because that is not always the most helpful or realistic way to think. It can be helpful to focus on what is really happening, not what we fear may happen and not necessarily what we would like to happen.

When things stay up in our heads they have a habit of looping round in seemingly endless circles. So a good way to begin can be to write down the worry, spelling it out as clearly as you can. Next, write down as many possible outcomes and solutions as you can. It doesn't matter how silly you may think the outcomes are; the point is to think of as many as you can. What would you advise a friend to do in this situation if they were going through what you are? Are there any experiences you have had in the past that may provide some ideas as to how to tackle this worry, even if you haven't faced this exact problem before? 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 well reduce. Force yourself to think *beyond* the catastrophe you are imagining. Well, what *would* actually happen? Sometimes our thinking takes us up to the most awful moment we can imagine, like a snapshot of the future, but then we feel so upset we stop thinking about it and never learn how we would get through it, if it ever came to pass. It is therefore sometimes helpful to think beyond this worst moment in order to realise that, whatever happens, the world will go on and somehow we will get through it, and so will others. By taking the sting out of the threat in this way we remove its power over us. Of course it is usually better to talk these things through with someone we trust, rather than try to confront our fears all by ourselves.

A completely different approach is to realise that whatever frightening thoughts you are having they won't in themselves do you any harm. People have all sorts of thoughts and images occurring to them from moment to moment. But just because we think something it doesn't mean it will happen. Thoughts are just that - thoughts; they are not real, even though we often imagine our thoughts to be much more powerful than they are.

So even the simple act of noticing your thoughts *without reacting* to them can be a helpful way forward. You may wish to practise trying to be more in the present in your thoughts, rather than in the past or in the future. Next time you eat a meal try to do it 'mindfully' by noticing every mouthful: what it tastes like, what it feels like, the speed at which you are eating, and so on. Try to be in the present moment; be aware of yourself and your surroundings. Think about this as you read these words. Observe your thoughts but try not to judge them. Think to yourself: "I notice I'm having the thought that..." By distancing yourself from your thoughts in this way you can learn to be less controlled by them and accept them for what they are: just thoughts.

### **3. Changing One's Behaviour**

Most people do their best to avoid situations which cause them anxiety. If you are suffering with anxiety you may well be feeling it prevents you from doing things that other people are able to do, and you may be avoiding situations which you think of as awkward or stressful. However, the trouble with avoiding difficult situations is that we prevent ourselves from learning how to overcome them. As a result, nothing changes; we remain fearful and go on avoiding certain aspects of our lives. Over time we lose even more



confidence. Once again, confidence at doing anything comes from practice and by learning things in small steps. By gradually confronting those situations that we may have avoided we can gently learn how to deal with them, while remaining mentally calm and physically relaxed.

Now let's develop a plan.

### **Developing a Plan**

Having a sensible plan for overcoming our fears means that we feel more in control. It's no good trying to face our worst fears on the first day. Like everything else in life, it is far better to learn gradually, taking one step at a time. You (preferably with someone else) might want to write out a list of all your fears and the things you avoid because of your anxiety. Be honest with yourself. This list can be very helpful in developing an overall plan. It can help to rate each item on your list from 0 (calm) to 10 (panic). Tackle each fear by predicting all the things that could possibly go wrong, as well as all the helpful things you could do to overcome the obstacles if they did occur. Think realistically about how likely it is that things actually would go wrong (How do you know? What do other people think?) and consider whether perhaps there are more hopeful ways of looking at the situation. How long would any particular difficulty last? What would happen the next day, the next month, the next year? If you no longer avoided these situations, how would your life change?

Then it comes to putting the plan into action. Start with the easiest fear and, if necessary, break it down into yet smaller steps until you can see a step that you are able to take without too much difficulty. This is the beginning! Take this step (focusing on keeping your body and thoughts as calm as possible) and repeat it until you are fully confident that you are able to do it calmly, without undue anxiety. If you feel bored by it you are probably no longer anxious about it. When you feel you have mastered this one, take the next step up the ladder. And so on. All the while, remind yourself to think calmly about what you are doing, soak up information about what you have previously avoided and learn from it. And, above all, remember to breathe calmly and notice your muscles so that you can repeatedly release any tension in them.

### **So, by way of summary ...**

If you feel symptoms of anxiety at any time:

- Don't try to fight your anxiety by tensing up your muscles. This won't help you get control over your body.
- Try to notice where you feel the tension in your body and then simply release the tension by relaxing the muscles involved. No deep breathing! Breathe calmly and slowly instead. Practise these skills as often as possible throughout the day.

- Attempt to get a perspective on the situation you are in. Try to notice the thoughts you are having and realise that they are just thoughts (“I notice I am having the thought that...”). The events you are thinking about are probably not happening now.
- Alternatively, do your best to pinpoint the source of the fears. Try to write them down or talk them through with a friend. Consider whether there is a different way of looking at the situation, perhaps from a different perspective.
- If you feel your life is affected by the fact that you avoid things, think about what small practical steps you might take to confront your fears, so that you can become more fully engaged in your life.

By thinking about the stresses you are facing and the ways in which you are managing them, you can learn a great deal about yourself. And by practising some of the ideas in this booklet you will soon find it much easier to deal with some of the stresses you are facing. In time you will learn to become a more relaxed person. No one is too old to change! Reading through this booklet has been a very good start.

As part of this self-help guide, we have included a CD containing exercises recorded by staff at The Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre and St Peters Hospice. The CD can be found at the back of this booklet.

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# Relaxation Exercises

Before doing the exercises on this CD, we recommend that you first read the proceeding chapters of this booklet. The exercises on this CD are designed to help you learn how to relax. They should be practised every day for several weeks, preferably not first thing in the morning or last thing at night (unless you experience insomnia) because these are times when the body is often already relaxed.

Only do the exercises on this CD which feel comfortable. They should not hurt when you do them.

Every time you do them, try to achieve a deeper state of relaxation. In between times, try to notice where tension creeps into your body, and if you notice it's there, try to let it go. This is perhaps the single most important thing you can do in controlling your overall level of tension or anxiety.

## CD Tracks

<b>Track1</b> (3 minutes)	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>Track 2</b> (18 minutes)	<b>Relaxation (female voice)</b>
<b>Track 3</b> (18 minutes)	<b>Relaxation (male voice + music)</b>
<b>Track 4</b> (2 minutes)	<b>Breathing Control Technique (female voice)</b>
<b>Track 5</b> (6 minutes)	<b>Visualisation (female voice)</b>
<b>Track 6</b> (5 minutes)	<b>Relaxation (female voice)</b>
<b>Track 7</b> (7 minutes)	<b>Music</b>