

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety and phobias affect about one in every ten people at some point in their lives. Anxiety is the normal human feeling of fear that we all experience when faced with threatening or difficult situations. It can help us to avoid dangerous situations, making us alert and giving us the motivation to deal with problems. But if these feelings of anxiety are too strong, they can stop us from doing the things we want to.

## What is panic?

A sudden unexpected surge of anxiety which makes you want to leave the worrying situation.

## What is a phobia?

A phobia is a fear of particular situations or things that are not dangerous and which most people do not find troublesome.

## What causes anxiety, panic and phobias?

### ■ Genes

Some of us seem to be born more anxious than others – research suggests that these problems can be inherited through our genes. However, even someone who is not naturally anxious can get anxious under enough pressure.

### ■ Circumstances

Sometimes it is obvious what is making you anxious. When the problem disappears, so does the anxiety. However, some circumstances are so threatening – like car crashes, train crashes or fires – that the anxiety goes on long after the event. You can feel nervous and anxious for months or years after the event, even if you were physically unharmed. This is called post-traumatic stress disorder.

### ■ Drugs

Street drugs like amphetamines, LSD or ecstasy can all make you anxious – for some people, the caffeine in coffee is enough.

### ■ Life experience

Bad experiences in the past, big changes in life in the present – pregnancy, changing job, becoming unemployed or moving house.

## What does anxiety feel like?

### ■ Mind

Feeling worried all the time, tiredness, being irritable, sleeping badly and not being able to concentrate.

### ■ Body

Racing heartbeat, sweating, muscle tension and pains, shaking, breathing heavily, dizziness, faintness, indigestion and diarrhoea.

If you are anxious already, you may worry that these symptoms are signs of serious illness and this can make the symptoms even worse.

## What does panic feel like?

A sudden and overwhelming sense of fear and loss of control. You breathe quickly, feel your heart pounding, sweat, and may feel that you are going to die. You get out of the situation as quickly as you can.

## What does a phobia feel like?

You get strong feelings of anxiety in the particular situations that frighten you. So if you have a phobia of dogs, you feel anxious when there are dogs around, but feel OK at other times. You tend to avoid the situations that make you anxious but this makes the phobia worse as time goes on. It can also mean that your life becomes increasingly dominated by the precautions you have to take to avoid such situations. You will usually realise that there is no real danger and may even feel silly about your phobia, but still can't control it.

## ... and you may also feel depressed

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Anxiety and panic are often accompanied by feelings of depression, when you feel glum, lose your appetite and see the future as bleak and hopeless.

## What help is available?

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### ■ Self-help

You can learn relaxation techniques through groups or professionals or teach yourself with books, CDs and DVDs (see our main leaflet at <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info>). Regular practice will help you to do these easily so that you can use them in a crisis. Self-help books and DVDs based on cognitive therapy can also help.

### ■ Talking it through

You may not want to talk to family members about your phobia or feelings of anxiety but it can help. Try a friend or relative whom you trust and respect, and who is a good listener. They may have had the same problem themselves or know someone else who has.

### ■ Self-help groups

Talking with people with similar problems can be easier because they understand what you are going through. They may be able to suggest ways of coping. These groups may focus on anxieties and phobias or on other problems, for example women's groups, bereaved parents groups, survivors of abuse groups.

### ■ Psychotherapy

This is a more intensive talking treatment that can help you to understand and control your anxieties. The treatment can take place in groups or individually and is usually weekly for several weeks or months. It is generally a form of cognitive-behavioural therapy.

### ■ Medication

- **Tranquillizers:** valium-type medicines, benzodiazepines (like most sleeping tablets). They are very effective but are quite addictive, even after using for 4 weeks. They should be taken for periods of 2 weeks or less.
- **Antidepressants:** work well in anxiety. However, they usually take 2 to 4 weeks to work and some can cause nausea, drowsiness, dizziness, dry mouth and constipation. See our main leaflet on antidepressants for more information (<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info>).
- **Beta blockers:** (usually used to treat high blood pressure) can be used in low doses to control the physical shaking of anxiety.