

Understanding anxiety and ways we can manage it

Child Health [Information patients and carers](#)

We hope this leaflet helps you support your child or young person to understand:

- what anxiety is
- ways to help manage anxiety
- who they could contact if they would like further support

What is anxiety

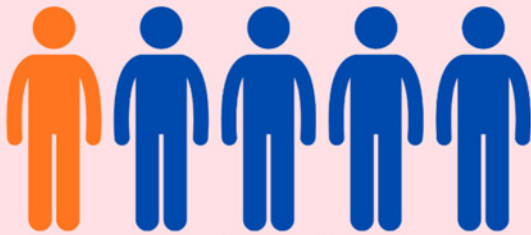
People often describe anxiety in lots of different ways. Sometimes people may say they are feeling:

- stressed
- worried
- irritable
- tense
- nervous
- uptight
- wound up
- unsettled



The way people describe anxiety might make it sound like a scary feeling. But it's a feeling lots of people have.

1 in 6 young people struggle with feelings of anxiety.



This means it's really common!

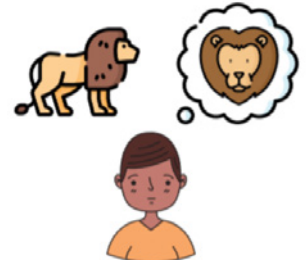
Anxiety isn't all bad!

It's a normal reaction to have to lots of different things.

It can even help keep us safe!

When we feel **on edge** we are prepared for unexpected things which could be dangerous. It keeps us alert. This helps us spot and avoid dangers.

When we feel **nervous** our body gets prepared to act quickly to keep us safe. Anxiety can help us recognise dangers in the future. This can change how we respond.



But we don't always need to feel this way.

Feeling **tense** or **worried** all the time doesn't feel very good.

It might stop us doing things we enjoy or want to try.

It's normal for new things to feel a little bit scary. Sometimes the worry feels overwhelming. We might need more support to help manage these feelings.

What does it feel like?

Anxiety can feel different to everyone. Some people might say they are:

- worrying a lot
- feeling very nervous and afraid
- thinking something bad is going to happen



When we are anxious, our body can react in lots of different ways.

Some people might notice they:



- feel very weak
- have tingling in hands or feet
- have a fast heart
- get a headache or tummy ache
- have trouble breathing
- start sweating
- feel dizzy
- have muscles that feel tight



Anxiety can affect how we think. People might have:

- a lot of thoughts in their head
- sleep problems
- poor focus



Lots of people react to anxiety in different ways.

Some people might try to hide their anxiety by showing other emotions like anger.

Some people might act differently to normal.

People might avoid things that scare them. This might mean they don't ever feel anxious at all. But over time it can stop them from doing things they want or need to do.



It's important to remember a little bit of anxiety is OK.

What might cause us to feel anxious?

Lots of different things can cause anxiety. Anxiety feels different to everyone. The reasons why one person might feel anxious might be different for someone else.

Some common reasons could be:



- being around other people
- talking with others
- loud or crowded places
- doing new or unfamiliar things
- changes to routine
- things not going as hoped
- doing an exam or a test



EXAM!



Sometimes we might not even know why we feel anxious.

Why might we avoid anxiety and how can we face it?

You might avoid things you feel **scared** or **worried** about. This can make you feel better for a little while. But over time this can make you feel worse. Worry can stop us from facing things. If we avoid them, we never find out that we can cope!



Our anxiety starts to get...

bigger, and bigger, and bigger!

What can you do?

Doing new or challenging things can make us feel nervous. This is completely normal. We can take small steps to facing our worries. This is called an '**anxiety ladder**'. You can try making your own to face some of your worries.



Remember!

You don't need to make **REALLY BIG** steps! Small little steps can make a big difference to how you feel.

Try to notice some of your feelings when facing your anxiety. If noticing your feelings is hard, you can try talking to someone you trust (like parents or friends) about what you are doing - they can help!

To start, think about something you want to focus on that makes you anxious

Give your worry a
FEAR RATING.

This is how worried you are out of 10



- 10 - NO WAY!!
- 9 - Super duper nope
- 8 - A big challenge
- 7 - Oh dear! I'm quite scared
- 6 - My heart is racing
- 5 - Not sure... I'm not happy
- 4 - Scary but I can
- 3 - I'm a little worried
- 2 - hmm, I think I can
- 1 - Yeah sure

Think about what makes you feel the least anxious about your worry and give that a fear rating.

Fill in all the steps on the ladder in between.

You might have more or less steps on your ladder!

Work up the ladder to help face your fear!
When we work up the ladder we notice our body react to our worry.

Over time this starts to get easier. It can help if we do other things like **focusing on our breathing**



Eventually we can face our fear, feeling calmer and more able!

touching a spider

10/10

8/10

Being near a big spider

7/10

Being near a little spider

5/10

Watching a spider move inside
the house

4/10

Watching a spider move
outside

3/10

Watching videos of spiders

2/10

Looking at pictures of spiders

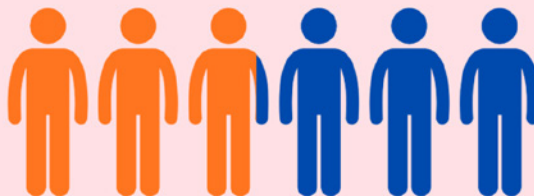
Thinking about
spiders is easy

We've left a blank copy near the
back for you!

What about people who are neurodivergent?

People who are neurodivergent, for example are autistic or have ADHD, often struggle with anxiety more than others.

Nearly half of autistic people struggle with anxiety.



There can be lots of reasons for this!

Noticing feelings:

Neurodivergent people can find it harder than others to feel or learn about their emotions.



This can make it tricky to pick out what 'a little anxious' feels like...

...before they realise it, they might already be feeling 'a lot anxious'.

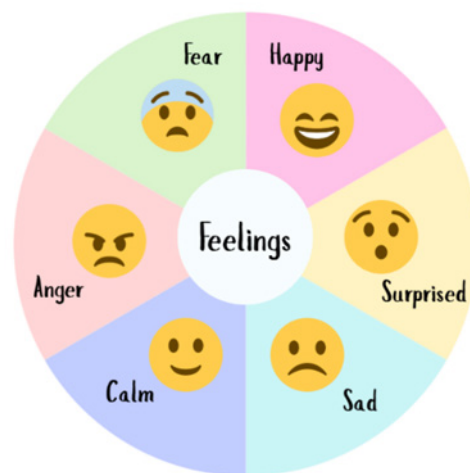


Other people can help by being curious about what neurodivergent people are feeling.

This might be voicing small changes in how they are acting, speaking, or behaving.

Bringing awareness to small changes can help build their attention to anxiety. That way they can spot it early before it becomes overwhelming.

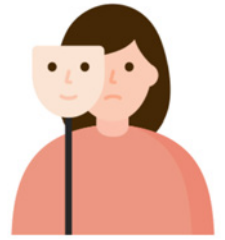
Helpful tools like a **feelings wheel** can make it easier to name and learn about emotions.



Masking:

Neurodivergent people often feel as though others do not understand them. They might try to stop their natural responses. Instead, they might copy actions that seem 'right' to others.

When this happens, they can feel like they don't fit in or belong. To try and help feel accepted, some people might begin to **mask**.



This can look like:

- acting out scripts or copying body language they have seen before
- faking smiles or laughter in uncomfortable situations
- stopping themselves from doing movements that feel good (like flapping or rocking)
- choosing what others want, rather than what is best for them
- letting others talk or decide things in a group situation

Masking is a way of **hiding yourself**.

Neurodivergent people might not always know they are doing it. But masking can be tiring.

Doing it for long periods can:

- raise anxiety
- cause tiredness
- lead to an emotional release when somewhere safe

'Taking off the mask' can help them feel calmer and more confident.

This can also build self-esteem and feeling accepted by others.

Talking with others:

We use lots of different skills when we talk to people. That means there's a lot to think about, even during a short chat.



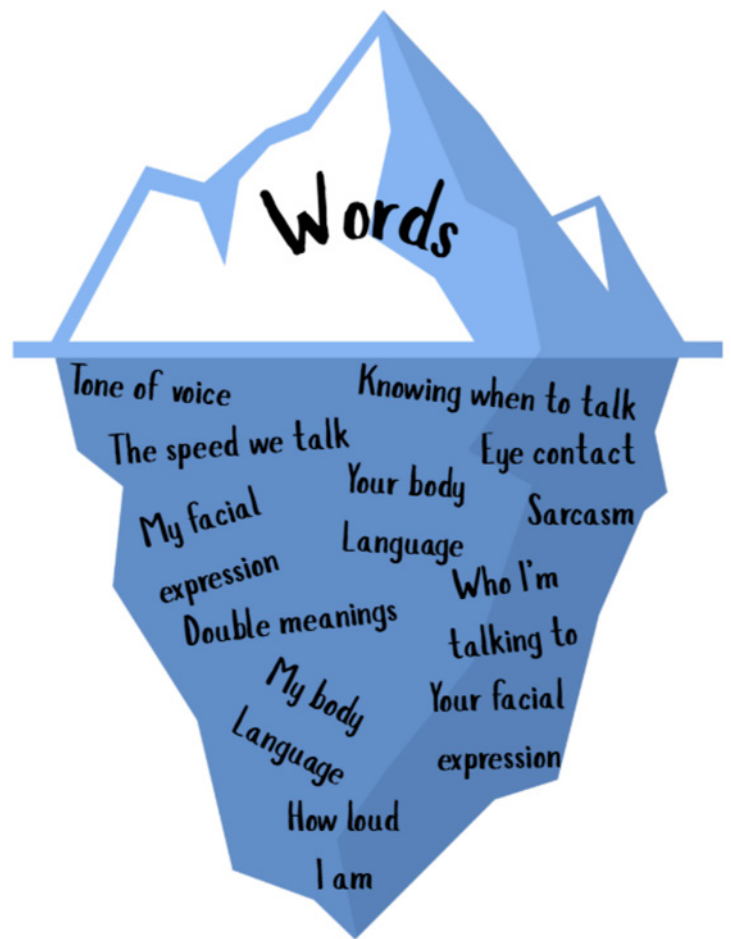
For neurodivergent people, this can be tricky. They might need to pay attention to what others do and say, as well as their own actions and words.

Noise, lights, crowds, and other surroundings can make them feel anxious or overwhelmed. Their senses may also be working hard to take in everything around them.

All these things can add up and raise anxiety. Some neurodivergent people may choose to avoid social situations. They might prefer to spend more time alone.

Changing the environment can help. This could be a familiar chair or sitting next to a familiar person.

Neurodivergent people can sometimes find social skills training helpful. It can help them to understand the next steps in social situations. This can help lower anxiety. Things like role play can also support in developing skills and confidence.



Different ways of talking:

Often neurodivergent people find it easier to talk with others who talk in a similar way to them. You can think about this like this:



Change:

Change can be tricky for some neurodivergent people. That is because change creates unpredictability and uncertainty. Things might start to feel unsafe or confusing.



When we have routines and structure, we know what to expect. This can help us find ways to respond to situations. This helps us feel calm and confident.

When routines change, we might feel confused and more stressed. It might not be clear what is expected from us. We might not be prepared for what could happen next.

Having a **reliable routine** can help make things easier.

Change is a normal part of life. What can make this easier is **preparing for change**. Explaining what will happen can give our body a chance to adjust. That way we remember we are safe.

Sensory experiences:

Neurodivergent people experience the world in different ways. Things in their surroundings can be overwhelming. This could be things like:



- **bright lights**
- **loud or quiet noises**
- **busy crowds or lots of people**
- **certain textures or fabrics**
- **strong smells**

Sensory experiences can often feel like too much for neurodivergent people. Especially when they are combined with things that can be tricky, like:

- **talking with others**
- **coping with change**
- **noticing feelings**
- **masking**

Things like wearing headphones or ear buds, or visiting places at quieter times, can often make a real difference.

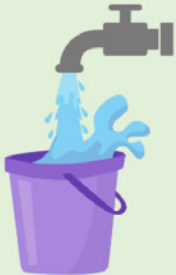
The stress bucket:

The stress bucket can help explain how managing all these experiences can feel.



Imagine a bucket. Every stress from the day is like water filling the bucket. By the time you go to bed, the bucket might be nearly full.

Doing things we enjoy, or taking breaks, can put little holes in the bucket. This lets out some of the water.



Neurodivergent people's buckets can fill faster than others. This is because of all the different challenges they face.

Sometimes they might not notice their feelings until the bucket is nearly full. They might not know what will work to put holes in their bucket.

When the bucket becomes too full, it can lead to a meltdown. A meltdown might look like crying, anger, or shutdown. This is when someone is so anxious and overwhelmed, they can't manage anymore.

What can help?

The more neurodivergent people learn about themselves, the better they can understand:

- **what helps to empty the bucket**
- **how to adjust their surroundings**
- **how to feel more in control, happier and less anxious**

Small changes can make a big difference. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Turning down bright lights**
- **Wearing noise-cancelling headphones**
- **Taking quiet breaks**
- **Choosing comfortable clothing**

By knowing about themselves, neurodivergent people can manage their bucket before it overflows.

What else can help?

There are lots of ways to help manage anxiety. You can try some of these ideas:

Stretch before bed

Anxiety can often show up when it is quiet. Often this is when we are trying to sleep at bedtime.

Stretching before bedtime can help relax our body. This helps send messages from our body to our brain that we are safe.

That way we can get a better night's sleep!



Talk to other people

When you feel anxious it's good to talk to other people about your feelings. This can help you feel less alone with your thoughts.

Other people can help you to feel better. They may know ways to solve the problem.



Do something active

Doing active things can help when you are feeling tense. It helps your body to use some of the energy made from anxious feelings.

Movement helps the body to feel good. This can help make you feel better overall.



Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises are a great way of helping to lower your anxiety.

These can be done at any time and help to calm your mind. Focusing on your breath also gives you something else to focus on that is not just your worries.



Go for a walk

Being out in nature can help lower anxious feelings. This can help you to feel better. It gives you time away from what is making you feel worried.

Going for a walk and noticing our surroundings can help us feel calmer.



Keep a diary

Diaries are a visual way of seeing your thoughts. They can help you to remember your day. Diaries help you think about reasons why you felt anxious in the day.

There's no right or wrong way to keep a diary, it's just for you!



Grounding

Grounding is a way of using your senses, sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. It helps to remind you where you are right now. Grounding can help distract any anxious thoughts.

It is a good skill for walks!



Be kind to yourself

Sometimes it can be easy to feel upset with your anxiety. Remind yourself that anxiety is a normal reaction. Everyone has anxiety.

Give yourself time to be grateful for things that happen in a day.

This can be a small step towards reducing anxiety.



What if I'm still anxious?

If you have tried some of these ideas and you still feel your anxiety is more than it should be, it might be good to speak to someone you trust.

This could include talking to family, friends, or teachers.

Talking to other people can help. We can notice that our feelings may feel bigger than they need to be.



What if after this, I'm still anxious?

You might need to seek help from other services. A trusted adult can help you do this.

Speak to your GP

Arrange a time to speak with your GP. You can talk about how you are feeling. They can help make a plan that will support you.

Mental Health Support Team (MHST) (if in your school)

The Mental Health Support Team work in certain schools in the local area. They offer 1:1 support for young people struggling with different mental health challenges. Speak to school if you feel you need support from MHST (if available)

Check if your school has MHST by going to:

camhsdorset.org/about-camhs/mental-health-support-teams-mhsts.



Kooth

Kooth is a free, safe, and anonymous online chat.

It is an emotional wellbeing service for young people aged 11 to 25.

Open online:

- Weekdays 12noon-10pm
- Weekends 6-10pm

Website: **Kooth.com**



Connections

Connection is a 24/7 helpline for people of all ages, anywhere in Dorset

You do not need to be known by the services.

You can phone for support and advice about a friend or family member with poor mental health.

Call: **0800 652 0190** or **111**

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)

The CAMHS website has good signposting for mental health support.

Website: **camhsdorset.org**

Dorset CAMHS:



There is also really good information on the Oxford CAMHS website:

oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/camhs/self-care/anxiety

Oxford CAMHS:



Childline

Call ChildLine and you'll get through to a counsellor. They're there to listen and support you with anything you'd like to talk about. You can have a 1-2-1 counsellor chat online. Childline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. So, you can talk to them any time.

Website: **childline.org.uk**

Call: **0800 1111**



Dorset Mind

Dorset Mind is a local charity. They help people in Dorset with mental health problems access support.

Website: **dorsetmind.uk**



YoungMinds

Young Minds are a charity for young people. They help offer tools to look after their mental health. They help adults to be the best support they can be. They give young people the space and confidence to get their voices heard.

Website: **youngminds.org.uk**



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Grounding



Box breathing



How to feel calm and relaxed with breathing

Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds.

Hold your breath for 4 seconds.

Breathe out through your mouth for 4 seconds.

Hold for 4 seconds.

Repeat as many times as you like.

Belly breathing



Lie or sit down on your back and rest your hand on your belly

Slowly breath in through your nose, letting your belly expand outward.

When your belly is full of air, hold your breath and silently count to three.

Slowly breath out through your mouth like you're blowing through a straw.

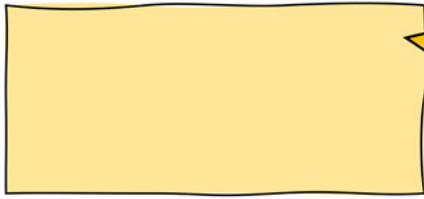
Repeat the steps four more times.

Stretching



1. Open your eyes wide, and now your nose and mouth.
2. Stretch your neck as much as you can.
3. Stretch your back. How many ways can you stretch your back?
4. Feel your chest and tummy stretching.
5. Stretch your arms far away from your body.
6. Stretch your fingers. How long can you make them?
7. Stretch your legs. How far can you make them go?
8. Stretch your feet. Stretch your toes as far as you can.

Now wiggle your fingers and toes and have a big stretch!



My anxiety
ladder

