

Dealing with anxiety

BY REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST SHARON HINSULL.



This spring's Mental Health Awareness Week shines a light on one of psychotherapy's most talked about issues. And, if current trends are anything to go by, it would appear to be a problem affecting an ever-growing number of people.

Counselling Directory sees an endless variety of search terms used by visitors to its website each month. A significant proportion will be centred on depression, bereavement, anger management or addiction. However, far and away, the most frequently applied search term is that of anxiety,

which consistently remains top of the directory's keyword results list. In January 2023 alone, there were well over 80,000 searches on anxiety recorded, compared with just over half that amount for depression which regularly ranks in second place.

In real terms, too, there would appear to be a marked increase in the number of people accessing therapy to help with this issue. In recent years, my practice has seen a growing influx of anxiety-related enquiries, mirroring the experience of many other mental health professionals nationwide.

IDENTIFYING THE CAUSE

There are various forms that anxiety can take, including generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety, panic disorder and OCD. Whilst some individuals may be more predisposed to developing anxiety than others, for many people, the condition can arise without any obvious underlying cause and with little, if any, warning. All too often, an accumulation of competing day-to-day demands will be enough to overload a person to the point of becoming anxious. Indeed, some people can be left feeling so overwhelmed that they fail to recognise the principal factors contributing to their heightened stress levels. In many cases, simply naming and identifying some of the key underlying

issues of concern can bring about a significant sense of relief. According to the mental health charity Mind, any combination of the following factors may potentially play a part in the development of anxiety:

- exhaustion or a build-up of stress
- lots of change or uncertainty
- feeling under pressure while studying or at work
- long working hours
- being out of work
- money problems
- housing problems and homelessness
- worrying about the environment or natural disasters
- losing someone close to you
- feeling lonely or isolated
- being abused, bullied, or harassed, including experiencing racism.





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THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

Whatever the underlying cause(s) of the anxiety, people can experience symptoms in various ways, and some of the signs often tend to be as much physical as psychological.

EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON YOUR BODY

These can include:

- a churning feeling in your stomach
- feeling light-headed or dizzy
- pins and needles
- feeling restless or unable to sit still
- headaches, backache or other aches and pains
- faster breathing
- a fast, thumping or irregular heartbeat
- sweating or hot flushes
- sleep problems
- grinding your teeth, especially at night
- nausea
- needing the toilet more or less often
- changes in your sex drive
- having panic attacks.

EFFECTS OF ANXIETY ON YOUR MIND

These can include:

- feeling tense, nervous or unable to relax
- having a sense of dread or fearing the worst
- feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down
- feeling like other people can see you're anxious and are looking at you
- feeling like you can't stop worrying or that bad things will happen if you stop worrying
- worrying about anxiety itself, for example, worrying about when panic attacks might happen
- wanting lots of reassurance from

- other people or worrying that people are angry or upset with you
- worrying that you're losing touch with reality
- low mood and depression
- rumination - thinking a lot about bad experiences or thinking over a situation again and again
- depersonalisation - a type of dissociation where you feel disconnected from your mind or body, or like you are a character that you are watching in a film
- derealisation - another kind of dissociation where you feel disconnected from the world around you or like the world isn't real
- worrying a lot about things that might happen in the future.

“MEN ARE ALSO MORE LIKELY TO USE DRUGS”

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MEN AND ANXIETY

Given the number of physical ways in which anxiety can present itself, it is perhaps unsurprising that some people don't immediately realise that hidden psychological factors could be at play. Men, in particular, it would seem, are less likely to recognise the mind-body connection when certain physical symptoms begin to appear. Anxiety in men can often present in a less obvious form than it might typically do in women. For instance, some men may display behaviours such as anger and irritability, or they might develop difficulties sleeping. Men are also more likely to use drugs or alcohol to help cope with any unresolved or difficult feelings.

Dr Suzanne Allen, a psychologist and co-director of CBT Westport in Connecticut, says, “Men have the same struggles with anxiety that women do, but it's socially acceptable for men to appear angry or use substances to cope. Revealing mental health issues can be perceived as a sign of weakness, which goes against the idea of masculinity that has been put into a man's mind.”

This apparent lack of willingness to talk about mental health, or not having adequate support to turn to, can be a significant contributory factor in men developing anxiety. A sizable proportion of the male patients with whom Dr Allen has worked are described as having “less emotionally supportive relationships and less language around expressing emotions than women.”

TAKING A PROACTIVE APPROACH

As well as recognising the need to talk about feelings, lifestyle too can play a very significant part in helping to improve the symptoms of anxiety. Diet, exercise, rest and relaxation are all important considerations when practising the kind of self-care that so often gets overlooked during periods of stress - at the very time we most need it.

Suppose there are any problems that you are currently worried about. In that case, as well as finding a trusted individual to confide in about your feelings, it may also be helpful to seek professional support to better manage the situation you are trying to deal with.

In some cases, anxiety symptoms can be attributed to other underlying medical issues that must be addressed. It is also not uncommon for anxiety to co-exist with a diagnosis of depression.

Whatever the background to the condition, if you find yourself struggling to cope with the debilitating effects of anxiety, it is advisable to speak with your GP at the earliest opportunity. As well as talk therapy (often in the form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), there are medical treatment options that might be suitable in some instances, especially during acute periods of stress where anxiety has become a significant issue to manage.

As with any mental health condition, it is essential to remember that you are not alone, and there is never any need to suffer in silence. However, the sooner you can get the conversation started, the more quickly you are likely to experience an improvement in how you feel.



Mental Health Awareness Week runs from May 15th to 21st. More information can be found here: [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

ORGANISATIONS OF SUPPORT

Anxiety UK is a national charity offering specialist therapy and support services to people experiencing anxiety symptoms.

No Panic offers support and recovery services for people with anxiety, including a dedicated hotline.

Mind has 125 local service centres based across the UK, providing support and information for anyone struggling with their mental health.

Mental Health Foundation leads the annual Mental Health Awareness campaign and offers a wide range of helpful resources on its website.

Rethink Mental Illness provides information and one-to-one support for mental health issues, including anxiety disorders. ❖



Sharon Hinsull is a BACP registered counsellor and psychotherapist.
[therapy-and-training.co.uk](https://www.therapy-and-training.co.uk)
Follow on Twitter @Therapy_CPD.