

Anxiety

This factsheet explains what anxiety is, how it can make you feel, what causes it and the different support options available to you in East Lothian.

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What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, dread or worry. It's a normal human emotion and it's normal to feel worried or anxious when faced with a stressful situation. For example, before an exam or an interview, or during a worrying time such as having an illness. Many people feel anxious for some time before and after stressful situations.

If these feelings of anxiety last for a long time or are very intense, they can interfere with everyday life causing severe distress. This can make you feel worried for a lot of your time and can have an impact on things like home life, employment and/or education.

Symptoms of anxiety

Anxiety can have physical and emotional effects. Some people will experience a few of the symptoms below, whilst others may experience all the symptoms. Anxiety can cause you to feel even more anxious as the symptoms are distressing in themselves.

Some of these symptoms include:

- feeling afraid or very worried
- a feeling of dread or panic
- being on edge
- being unable to concentrate
- difficulty sleeping
- depersonalisation - an unusual experience where the person feels as if they are unreal.

Physical symptoms can include:

- sweating
- feeling very hot
- blushing
- fast shallow breathing/shortness of breath
- dry or tight throat
- rapid or irregular heartbeat
- feeling dizzy/fainting
- stomach aches
- loss of appetite
- abdominal churning

The science of anxiety

When you are challenged with a difficult situation, which may cause you to feel anxious or panicky, your Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) switches on. SNS is what causes these physiological symptoms listed above. One of the chemicals in your brain which affects these symptoms of anxiety is **norepinephrine**. When norepinephrine is released, it tells the body to panic.

The vicious cycle of anxiety

When you are feeling anxious, you will be focusing more on the potential threats around you. This is what causes your physical symptoms to flare up. In the short-term, it may feel easier to avoid situations or topics that cause anxiety. However, in the long term, this can cause your anxiety to get worse because you haven't fully dealt with the issue. This is called the 'vicious cycle of anxiety'. However, you can work on reversing this cycle by challenging these difficult situations and developing coping skills to manage your anxiety.

Types of anxiety disorder

There are various types of anxiety disorders. The list below includes some of the most common disorders.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Anxiety can be a long-term disorder where you feel worried most of the time about things that might go wrong. This is called 'Generalised Anxiety Disorder' (GAD). GAD causes people to feel anxious about a wide range of situations rather than just one or a few specific issues.

Phobias

A phobia is a fear that is out of proportion to any real danger. If a phobia interferes with a person's ability to lead a normal life, then it may be considered an anxiety disorder. Common phobias are fears of heights, spiders, mice, blood, injections, or enclosed spaces. Agoraphobia is also common and is a fear of being feeling trapped and unable to escape from a situation. Sometimes, this can lead to people staying at home and feeling unable to go out unless they have someone else with them.

Social anxiety disorder

Also known as social phobia, social anxiety disorder causes extreme distress about interacting with or meeting other people. This is a complex phobia that often involves people worrying about what others will think of them. People with social anxiety disorder often worry that they will humiliate or embarrass themselves, and will often try to avoid social situations where possible.

Panic disorder

People with panic disorder experience panic attacks regularly. Although these might not always have an obvious cause or trigger. A panic attack is a sudden and intense feeling of anxiety that occur without warning and for no apparent reason. Panic attacks have physical symptoms as well (see symptoms of anxiety disorders). The feelings may feel like a wave of panic and can be very intense. Panic attacks usually last five to ten minutes but they can last longer. Although they can be frightening and feel horrible, they do not cause physical harm and will pass.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD is an anxiety disorder and consists of recurring obsessions and/or compulsions. Obsessions are recurring thoughts or images about specific things that trigger feelings of disgust, worry, discomfort or fear. Common obsessions include fears around germs, dirt, or violence. Compulsions are thoughts or actions that people feel they must do or repeat. A compulsion is usually a response to ease the anxiety of an obsession. For example, repeatedly washing your hands to deal with an obsession with dirt.

Health anxiety

Health anxiety is similar to OCD because it causes you obsessional concern that you are, or will become, physically unwell. Another name for this is hypochondriasis or illness phobia. Health anxiety can cause you to constantly self-diagnose, need reassurance from people around you that you are okay and not trust diagnosis from health professionals.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is caused by witnessing or being involved in a traumatic event, such as abuse or assault, a major accident, or military combat. Anxiety, which may come and go, is one of the symptoms. Other symptoms include unwelcome and recurring thoughts, memories, images, dreams, or distressing 'flashbacks' of the trauma. It's common to react with anxiety to a frightening experience – it's only considered to be PTSD if the symptoms don't go away. It may develop years after the traumatic event.

Causes of anxiety disorders

Anxiety may be a symptom of other mental health difficulties, such as

depression. Some examples of causes include:

- a history of mental health difficulties in your family
- living with a long-term or life-threatening condition
- experiencing a traumatic or stressful event in your life such as divorce, losing a job, financial issues, bereavement or abuse
- substance abuse, such as alcohol or drugs
- A thyroid disorder

Treatment

Visit your GP

For most people, the first step is to approach their GP for help. A GP will want to identify any physical or psychiatric problems that may be causing anxiety. If the GP suspects a thyroid disorder or some other physical illness, they will want to take a blood test. Your GP might prescribe medication initially or other treatment such as 'Cognitive Behaviour Therapy' (CBT), exercise or self-help books on prescription.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

CBT is a type of talking therapy, or psychotherapy, carried out by a specially trained therapist. CBT is based on the idea that negative thinking results in negative reactions.

Medication

Your GP may prescribe the medication to help manage anxiety. There are lots of different types of medications available and sometimes antidepressants can be used to treat anxiety.

Always ask your doctor for advice and read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medication.

Self-help and lifestyle

Self-help

Self-help is often suggested as the first step in treating anxiety. There are many ways to access self-help, for example, booklets, telephone services and websites. Self-help support groups are a good place to find people you

can talk to you. Other group members may understand how you feel because they have probably had similar feelings. Many people find attending a group helps them feel less alone.

Lifestyle choices

Eating well and exercising regularly can help reduce anxiety. There is some evidence that stopping smoking can improve symptoms of anxiety as well.

Mindfulness is a practice where you take notice of the present moment in the efforts to be more self-aware and calmer. Have a look at the NHS page on mindfulness - www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness

There is a range of **mental health apps** you can download to help manage your symptoms. Have a look at the NHS apps library for a list of apps available - www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health

Related information

This section highlights several services and resources which are designed to support people affected by anxiety. For more information on what is available in East Lothian, please go to www.eastspace.org.uk.

Anxiety UK is a national user-led organisation, run by people with experience of living with anxiety, stress or anxiety-based depression, supported by a high-profile medical advisory panel. Their website has great resources on what anxiety is, how to manage it and how to support someone with it.
www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Haddington Peer Support Group is a peer-led, wellbeing support group. The group aims to benefit people who have lived experience of mental health difficulties by offering a safe supportive space to meet.
www.eastspace.org.uk/service/hadd-peer-project

Living Life to the Full is a website with online courses covering low mood, stress and resiliency.
www.lltff.com

Moodjuice is a website designed to help you think about emotional problems and work towards solving them.

<http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk>

NHS Stress Control Class is a free NHS course that can help you understand stress and how to cope with it.

www.eastspace.org.uk/service/stress-control-class-changes

Self-help - On this page you will find up to date information about a range of self-help resources, materials and services which are easily accessible and free of charge.

www.eastspace.org.uk/self-help

Wellbeing Walks is a service run by Changes Community Health Project. They aim to promote the positive wellbeing of people living in East Lothian. It offers a wide range of courses, groups, therapies and activities to help manage stress, anxiety and depression and maintain wellbeing.

<http://www.eastspace.org.uk/service/changes-wellbeing-walks>