



# Anxiety

## About Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal feeling and is an unavoidable part of life. Anxiety often is triggered in new situations or at times when we are worried about an upcoming problem. When anxiety is more frequent or severe it can interfere with our quality of life and cause a lot of distress. Anxiety disorders affect around 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men at some point in their lives.



## The types of Anxiety

There are many different types of anxiety. But these types all share some key characteristics including:

- **Ways of feeling.** A range of physical symptoms and emotions can be present including being easily startled, having a racing heart with no physical cause, feeling nauseous, and feeling overwhelmed or a sense of dread. Sleep can also be affected.
- **Ways of thinking.** This can mean worrying about lots of different things, expecting the worst to happen, or experiencing increased self-consciousness.
- **Ways of behaving.** This may include avoiding situations or people that make you feel nervous. Or, constantly seeking reassurance from others in an effort to reduce worrying.

## Fight or flight response

To understand what is happening with anxiety it is helpful to understand why our bodies feel the way they do when we are anxious. When a threat is perceived (real, or imagined), the fight or flight response is triggered in our bodies.

A number of physiological responses occur including:

- Increased heart rate and shallow breathing.
- Butterflies in your stomach or nausea.
- Muscle tension
- Shakiness
- A dry mouth

The fight or flight response can feel uncomfortable and overwhelming. However, it is actually a very adaptive response that has helped our ancestors to run away from predators with greater speed, or fight someone with greater strength. This response is unfortunately not always helpful in modern-day stressful situations such as sitting an exam or having a difficult conversation with a loved one.

## Strategies for managing anxiety

Research over the past few decades has shown anxiety to be a very manageable condition. There are a range of different psychological skills and strategies to manage anxiety. What works for you may depend on the type of anxiety you are experiencing. The strategies listed below are intended to be a brief introduction. Although you may find some benefit from these resources, keep in mind that seeking professional support is another option to addressing anxiety, and can be more effective in determining what works for you.

# Anxiety

## 1. Breathing exercises

When the fight or flight response is triggered, our breathing usually becomes shallow and fast. Slowing down the rate of your breathing is one way to reduce anxiety levels. Focus on expanding your stomach (not your upper chest) when you inhale, and allowing your stomach to fall back down again when you exhale. Breathe in for about four seconds, and out for about four seconds. Beware that your counting will usually speed up when you're stressed, so be sure to slow it down! Once your breathing rate has slowed, your heart rate will usually follow.

## 2. Challenging worries and negative thinking

Often when people are feeling anxious, they use particular thinking styles that trigger anxiety. For example, imagine Joe is delivering an oral presentation when he notices two classmates whispering up the back of the class. Joe may make an assumption such as "they must be whispering about how stupid I sound" without any evidence that this is true. This thought will trigger anxiety in Joe and he may start to notice his hands trembling and may lose concentration as he speaks.

Thought challenging is a skill that you can develop to break down negative thinking, and develop more balanced and helpful ways of thinking. In this example, a more balanced thought for Joe would be "They are whispering but it is probably not about me. They are probably whispering about something unrelated to me or my talk". Thought challenging is a skill that needs to be developed. For more information, we recommend the following resources:

**Beyond Blue** video clip  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7yFsySn-QQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7yFsySn-QQ)

**Centre for Clinical Interventions** resources  
[www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info\\_ID=46](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=46)

## 3. Worry time

Do you spend a lot of time caught up in worries that go around and around in your head? Is this process beneficial or unproductive? Worry can be advantageous if it helps us to identify future problems and solutions for such problems. For example, when Joe worried about his faulty brake lights on his car, this prompted him to get it fixed. However, sometimes worry can be intrusive, dominating our days and keeping us awake at night. Often, such worries are not confronted and dealt with, meaning unresolved worries pop up again and again.

It may sound strange, but one effective technique to manage worries, is to set aside a time each day specifically to worry! Sit down for 20-30 minutes with a pen and paper, directly confront your worries, and problem-solve anything that can be solved. If the problems can't be solved, going through this process can help to at least acknowledge that you have done all that you possibly could do. When worries pop up at other times, postpone the worry until the next designated worry time.

For more information, see the **Centre for Clinical Interventions** website on postponing worries:  
[www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini\\_ID=21](http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=21)

## 4. Learning mindfulness

As opposed to being in 'automatic pilot' mode whereby people get caught up in their worries, mindfulness is a way to truly engage with the present moment and let go of the negative thoughts that automatically pop into our heads. Mindfulness can have benefits of improving focus, and bringing calm and balance to life. See the mindfulness apps at the end of this information sheet for further information and to read about the science behind mindfulness.

## Wanting to work on this further?

### Online resources and apps

**E-couch** is an online programs where you can learn evidence-based ways of managing your anxiety at your own pace: <https://ecouch.anu.edu.au/welcome>

The mindfulness apps below are a great introduction to the act of mindfulness:

**Smiling Mind** <http://smilingmind.com.au>

**Headspace**  
[www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app](http://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app)

### Face-to-face counselling

See the "where else to get help" section of our webpage for counselling options in your local area.

Alternatively, see our website or call us on 9360 1227 to find out about counselling services at Murdoch University Health.

## Where are we?

The main Counselling centre is at the South Street Campus on Bush Court. We also have some counselling available at Peel.

**Email for all campuses:**  
[counsellingservice@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:counsellingservice@murdoch.edu.au)

**South Street Campus**  
Social Sciences Building 440 (Bush Court)  
Phone: (08) 9360 1227  
Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

**Peel Campus Student Centre**  
Phone: (08) 9582 5501  
Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

[www.murdoch.edu.au/Counselling](http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Counselling)