



**Independent
Age**

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Patient Information Forum

Managing anxiety

Ways to cope and
where to get support



Thank you

We would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this guide was being developed, and those who reviewed it for us. Our special thanks go to Mind for their expert knowledge during the review.

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We spoke to older people about their experiences. Their quotes appear throughout. We have changed the names of some of the interviewees who wished to be anonymous. Some of the images seen throughout this guide are posed by friends of Independent Age.

The PIF TICK is the UK-wide Quality Mark for Health Information.

About this guide

Most of us feel anxious sometimes, especially in stressful situations, but if it's stopping you enjoying your life, it may be a sign you could use some support.

Although the experience of anxiety is common in older people, anxiety isn't an inevitable part of ageing. There are things you can try that might help and there are treatments available.

This guide explains what anxiety is and why you may be affected. It looks at where you can get support and suggests ways you can try to help yourself or someone else.



In this guide you'll find references to our other free publications. To order them, call **0800 319 6789** or visit **independentage.org/publications**.



1. What is mental health?

Your mental health describes your emotional wellbeing – how you think, feel and react. It's just as important as your physical health and, like your physical health, it can get better or worse over time.

1. What is mental health?

Your mental health can change with your situation and as you move into different stages of your life.

If you do experience anxiety, you're not alone. Research suggests that anxiety may affect around 3 in 10 older people. It's important to talk about how you feel and seek help.

“ I try to answer unanswerable questions. I play situations out in my head – how could I have done this better? – and so on.



2. What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear. Everyone feels anxious sometimes – but when the feeling is very strong or it continues for a long time, it can stop you enjoying your life.

2. What is anxiety?

Anxiety can make it hard to go about your daily life and you may find it difficult to look after yourself. It can also have an impact on your relationships. It may stop you trying new things.

People can experience many different symptoms of anxiety. Your doctor may diagnose you with a specific anxiety disorder, such as general anxiety disorder (GAD), panic attacks, phobias or social anxiety. But it's also possible to experience anxiety without a specific diagnosis.

Feeling anxious is common in older people. It may be something you've experienced throughout your life or, less commonly, something you're experiencing for the first time. If this is the case, it may be a symptom of another illness.



If you have any concerns about your health, try to speak to your GP for advice and support.

“ Your head plays games with you. All these thoughts are going round and round. ”

What causes anxiety?

There are many reasons why you might be affected and there may be a combination of factors.

Some of the life changes that may happen as you get older can increase your feelings of anxiety, such as:

- a physical illness – for example, thyroid disease or a painful long-term condition such as arthritis
- a mental health condition
- retirement
- feeling a lack of purpose in life
- finding it more difficult to do the things you used to do
- loneliness
- bereavement and loss
- money problems
- feeling more vulnerable as you get older – for example, feeling more at risk of scams
- becoming a carer.

2. What is anxiety?

If you have a learning disability, you may be more susceptible.

Some medications can cause anxiety. If you're already on medication, ask your GP or pharmacist for a Medicines Use Review.



Our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions** has more advice to help you manage your medication.

Your diet can also contribute to anxiety or make your symptoms worse. Even caffeine or too much sugar can make some people feel more anxious.

Anxiety can also be the result of a trauma or an experience of abuse or mistreatment. If you are affected by anxiety, see **chapter 4** for where you can get help.



Anxiety and depression

Some of the symptoms of depression and anxiety overlap, and the treatments are similar. It's not unusual to have both.



See our guide **Dealing with depression** for more information about the symptoms of depression and ways to cope.

2. What is anxiety?

Anxiety and dementia

Anxiety can be part of dementia and may be accompanied by changes in behaviour, such as agitation, not wanting to be left alone, pacing, feeling restless and fidgeting.

If you're worried, speak to your GP. You could also contact the Alzheimer's Society for advice (**0333 150 3456**, alzheimers.org.uk) or Alzheimer Scotland (**0808 808 3000**, alzscot.org).





3. How you might feel

Anxiety can cause both physical and psychological symptoms, which vary from person to person.

3. How you might feel

You may experience symptoms without having a specific diagnosis, but there are three main kinds of diagnosed anxiety disorder:

- **generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)** – this means feeling some of the symptoms of anxiety regularly or most of the time (see **page 13**)
- **phobias** – this means experiencing extreme anxiety about specific situations or objects, such as visiting the dentist or spiders. You'll probably know what causes it and it may make you avoid certain situations
- **panic disorder** – this means having regular panic attacks. A panic attack is a kind of fear response in which you feel very intense physical and mental symptoms. It can be quite frightening but doesn't usually last very long. You may feel afraid of having another panic attack.

Recognising the signs

You may feel some of the following:

- worried all the time
- tired
- unable to concentrate
- irritable
- unable to sleep
- depressed.

You may also experience physical sensations such as:

- fast or irregular heartbeats (palpitations)
- feeling tense and uptight
- sweating
- pins and needles
- dry mouth
- trembling
- dizziness
- feeling sick (nausea)
- your stomach churning.

3. How you might feel

“ Know that it will pass.
I’ve suffered from
panic attacks and have
learned to breathe and
distract myself until the
moment passes.

These physical sensations happen because your body senses fear and prepares itself for an emergency. This is known as the ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response.

For some people, worrying about the physical symptoms of anxiety, particularly panic attacks, can become a vicious circle. You may feel anxious about the symptoms returning and find it difficult to tell if they may be the sign of a physical illness. These worries can make your anxiety worse.

When to seek help

Anxiety can become a mental health problem if you find it difficult to control your feelings and you start to withdraw from people or avoid the things that make you feel anxious. For example, if you have a fall, you might become anxious about going out on your own and stop going out. This could mean you lose contact with your friends.

If you have any concerns about your symptoms, it's always okay to speak to your GP about them.

Many people who experience anxiety never ask for help, yet there are effective treatments and strategies to help you cope.

“ The feelings of anxiety make it hard to get out and about and see people, so it can be lonely.

3. How you might feel

If you feel that your symptoms are taking over your life, contact your GP or local mental health services. See **chapter 4** for details of where you can get support.

Some of us use smoking, alcohol or recreational drugs to ease the symptoms of anxiety, but this can make your anxiety worse in the long term and affect your general health and wellbeing.



Speak to your GP or a support organisation if you need help – see our guide **Understanding alcohol and drug misuse.**



4. Getting support

It's not unusual to feel anxious, especially if you've been going through a difficult time. The feeling may pass – but if it doesn't, it's a good idea to seek help.

4. Getting support

Anxiety can improve, no matter how long you've been affected.

Talk to your GP

It can be difficult to reach out, but asking for help can be the first step to feeling better. You might find it helpful to have someone with you when you go to your GP.

Your GP can check your general health to make sure there isn't a physical cause for your anxiety. You may be asked to complete a questionnaire about when you feel nervous, anxious or worried.

“ Sometimes GPs are busy or not sympathetic. It's important to persevere if it takes time to find the right help. Don't suffer alone in silence or give up.

Your GP should then discuss treatment options with you. These could include talking therapies, relaxation therapy, medication or a combination of these.

If you have another problem, such as depression or alcohol misuse, you might need treatment for that first.

If going to the doctor makes you feel anxious, you could ask for a telephone appointment or find out if they do home visits.

If you need to speak to someone urgently, contact NHS **111** or ask your GP for an emergency appointment. If you need to talk, you could call a helpline like the Samaritans (**116 123, [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)**). See **chapter 5** for other organisations.

Mind has more information about getting help in a crisis at **[mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/getting-help-in-a-crisis](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/getting-help-in-a-crisis)**.

4. Getting support

How is anxiety treated

There are a few different treatment options for anxiety, including self-help resources, talking therapies and medication.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is one of the most common. This is a talking therapy and it can help you understand how your thoughts can affect your feelings, including your anxiety. You'll learn strategies to help you cope when you feel anxious.

You may be offered CBT in a group or one to one. You may also be offered online CBT or self-help books – see **chapter 5** for more on ways to help yourself.

Your GP can refer you to a psychological therapies service on the NHS. In England, Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services are open to all adults and you can call them direct if you wish – you don't need a referral. They offer talking therapies to help with anxiety and depression.

You can find contact details at **[nhs.uk/service-search/psychological-therapies-\(IAPT\)/LocationSearch/10008](https://nhs.uk/service-search/psychological-therapies-(IAPT)/LocationSearch/10008)** or ask your local Healthwatch for information (**0300 068 3000**, **healthwatch.co.uk**).

Applied relaxation therapy

Applied relaxation usually involves meeting with a trained therapist for one-hour sessions over a period of three to four months. They will teach you how to relax your muscles in a particular way when you're in situations that make you anxious.



4. Getting support

Medication

If psychological therapy doesn't work or your symptoms are severe, you may be offered medication. Some can be taken long term, such as certain anti-depressants.

However, some medications like sedatives can be addictive and should only be used for a short time. If you have any concerns, speak to your GP or pharmacist.



Getting support that meets your needs

If you have particular needs because of your cultural or religious background, ask your GP to refer you to services that can meet those needs – for example, if you want to see a practitioner from the same background. Mind has some information about this at [mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/racism-and-mental-health/#WaysToSupportYourMentalHealth](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/racism-and-mental-health/#WaysToSupportYourMentalHealth).

You have a right to receive information in an accessible format if you need it – for example, large print, audio or braille – or to get support from an interpreter.

If you have a learning disability

The NHS must try to make it easy for people with a learning disability to use health services, by offering longer appointments or information in easy read, for example. Contact the Mencap Learning Disability Helpline for more information (**0808 808 1111**, [mencap.org.uk](https://www.mencap.org.uk)).

4. Getting support

Advocacy

If you're finding it difficult to get the support you need, you may benefit from the help of an advocate. They can help you make sure your views are heard. Ask your local council for details of advocacy services in your area. You could also contact:

- Mind (**0300 123 3393**, mind.org.uk)
- the Older People's Advocacy Alliance (opaal.org.uk)
- the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (**0131 510 9410**, siaa.org.uk)
- your local Community Health Council in Wales (**029 2023 5558**, boardchc.nhs.wales/your-local-chc).



In some situations, you may have a legal right to an advocate. For more information, see our factsheet **Helping you get your voice heard: Independent advocacy**.

Support at work

If you're working, your employer may offer a service such as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

Support from charities and other organisations

You could contact charities that offer support, such as Anxiety UK (**03444 775 774**, [anxietyuk.org.uk](https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)) and No Panic (**0300 772 9844**, [nopanic.org.uk](https://www.nopanic.org.uk)). They may charge for some of their services.

Contact the Mind Infoline for information about organisations that may be able to help (**0300 123 3393**, [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk)). You could also get in touch with your local Mind ([mind.org.uk/about-us/local-minds](https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/local-minds)). In Scotland, contact the Scottish Association for Mental Health (**0344 800 0550**, [samh.org.uk](https://www.samh.org.uk)).



4. Getting support

Find a private therapist

Waiting lists for NHS talking therapies can be long and you may only be offered a short course of treatment. If you can, you might prefer to organise private therapy. Costs vary so it's worth looking around. Ask your GP for recommendations.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has a searchable directory (**01455 883300**, bacp.co.uk/search/therapists) or you can find a CBT therapist on the online CBT register (cbtregisteruk.com).

For services in Scotland, contact COSCA (**01786 475140**, cosca.org.uk/our-services/find-counsellor/find-a-counsellor). Make sure the therapist is accredited by a professional body such as the BACP.

Help with other problems

If you're finding it difficult to look after yourself, make sure you're getting enough support. Start by asking your local council for a care needs assessment, which will work out what your care needs are and how they might be met.

You can find contact details in the phone book or at [gov.uk/apply-needs-assessment-social-services](https://www.gov.uk/apply-needs-assessment-social-services).



Our factsheet **First steps in getting help with your care needs** has more details.

If you're a carer, our guide **Caring for someone** has information about the practical, emotional and financial support available to help you in your caring role.

4. Getting support

If you're worried about a specific problem or you've been through a difficult situation, there may be a specialist organisation that can help, such as:

- Cruse Bereavement Care (**0808 808 1677**, **cruse.org.uk**) or Cruse Scotland (**0808 802 6161**, **crusescotland.org.uk**) – or see our guide **Coping with bereavement**
- Relate for relationship advice (**0300 100 1234**, **relate.org.uk**) or contact Relationships Scotland (**0345 119 2020**, **relationships-scotland.org.uk**)
- support groups for alcohol or drug dependency such as Alcoholics Anonymous (**0800 917 7650**, **alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk**) or Narcotics Anonymous (**0300 999 1212**, **ukna.org**).



See our guide **Understanding alcohol and drug misuse**.

If you're worried about money

If money worries are making you feel anxious, make sure you're claiming all the benefits you're entitled to. Call our Helpline (**0800 319 6789**) to arrange a free benefits check or try our benefits calculator (**independentage.org/benefit-calculator**).

If you're online, you could also visit the Mental Health and Money Advice service for advice and help (**mentalhealthandmoneyadvice.org**).

For debt advice, contact Stepchange (**0800 138 111**, **stepchange.org**) or National Debtline (**0808 808 4000**, **nationaldebtline.org**).



See our **Moneywise** guide for ways to boost your income and save money.



5. Ways to help yourself

There are many things you can do to help yourself, whether or not you're getting help elsewhere.

Different things work for different people at different times. Be kind to yourself and only try what feels comfortable.

Talk about it

It can be really helpful to talk to someone you trust who is a good listener. If there isn't anyone you feel you can talk to, you could try contacting a helpline such as The Silver Line, a free, confidential helpline for older people (**0800 470 8090**, **thesilverline.org.uk**) or the Samaritans (**116 123**, **samaritans.org**).

Sometimes it helps to talk to people who have been through similar experiences. They will understand what you're going through and may be able to share ways to cope. Contact mental health charities, such as:

- Rethink (**0808 801 0525**, **rethink.org**)
- Mind (**0300 123 3393**, **mind.org.uk**)
- Breathing Space – Scotland (**0800 838587**, **breathingspace.scot**)
- C.A.L.L. – Wales (**0800 132 737**, **callhelpline.org.uk**).

They can put you in touch with local support groups or you may be able to join an online forum.

5. Ways to help yourself

Try self-help resources

These are therapies that you can do at home in your own time. For anxiety, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends therapies that are based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). They include things like guided self-help, where you work through a workbook, and free online resources, such as:

- NHS guides, tools and activities ([nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities))
- Living Life to the Full skills courses ([lltff.com](https://www.lltff.com))
- Every Mind Matters ([nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters))
- an anxiety self-help guide on NHS Inform ([nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/anxiety-self-help-guide](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/anxiety-self-help-guide))
- Silvercloud programmes ([nhswales.silvercloudhealth.com/onboard/nhswales](https://www.nhswales.silvercloudhealth.com/onboard/nhswales)).

There are many self-help books that could help you deal with your anxiety, such as Reading Well Books on Prescription ([readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-well](https://www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-well)). Ask your GP or your local library for recommendations.

Recovery Colleges

Recovery Colleges offer free courses for people with mental health problems, which are designed to help you manage your own recovery and mental health. Contact Mind for more information and to find out if there's one near you (**0300 123 3393**, **mind.org.uk**).

Write it down

Keeping a diary may help you to spot patterns and identify the things that cause you to feel anxious, so you can manage your anxiety better. Make a note of the things that are troubling you.

It's also a good idea to record the things that make you feel happy and coping strategies that have worked for you.

“ Make a note of three positive things every day, no matter how small.

5. Ways to help yourself

Look after yourself

It's important to take care of your general health. Try to:

- stay active – regular light exercise can help to relieve stress and improve your mood
- get enough sleep – if you're having problems with this, try changing your routine. Follow the tips at [independentage.org/get-advice/health/healthy-living/getting-a-good-nights-sleep](https://www.independentage.org/get-advice/health/healthy-living/getting-a-good-nights-sleep) or speak to your GP
- eat a healthy, balanced diet, including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- avoid caffeine, smoking and alcohol because these can all increase your anxiety. Contact NHS Smokefree National Helpline for help to stop smoking (**0300 123 1044**, nhs.uk/smokefree)

- learn relaxation techniques and breathing exercises to help you to feel calmer. You can find some breathing exercises at [nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress)
- practise yoga or Pilates to help you unwind
- listen to relaxation podcasts or CDs, which may help you to feel calmer.

Visit the Living well pages on our website for more information about staying active and eating well ([independentage.org/get-advice/wellbeing/living-well](https://www.independentage.org/get-advice/wellbeing/living-well)) or speak to your GP for advice.

“ When I’m feeling really anxious I try to sit down, close my eyes and breathe in through my nose for five seconds then let it out through my mouth for five seconds. Repeating that for a few minutes can help.

5. Ways to help yourself

Complementary therapies

You may find complementary therapies helpful, such as aromatherapy, massage and meditation. It's important to think about whether a treatment is right for you before trying it. Mind has more information about things to consider at [mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/complementary-and-alternative-therapies](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/complementary-and-alternative-therapies).

Try to manage your worries

Rather than worrying all the time, set aside about 10 to 15 minutes a day as 'worry time'. If you start to worry at other times, tell yourself to wait.

During your worry time, don't try to come up with solutions – just worry. Time yourself and try not to let the worrying go on when your worry time is up.

“ Although they are designed for children, I have a Guatemalan worry doll and it can be useful to tell it my worries at night, then put it under my pillow when I go to bed.

“ I’ve taken up yoga, not only to get more exercise, but concentrating on the moves and balancing during the class helps take my mind off other worries. I really look forward to having an hour each week where I can have peace of mind from the day-to-day stresses.

Stay connected

If you find that loneliness and social isolation make you feel more anxious, try to stay in touch with people – they can help you see things differently.

Find ways to increase your social connections, such as doing a course or taking up a new hobby. Doing things you enjoy can help take your mind off your worries.

5. Ways to help yourself

Consider volunteering

Helping others is good for your mental health and many organisations need volunteers.

If you'd like to build new connections and friendships, our community or telephone volunteers may be able to help you find new ways to get out and about. Contact Independent Age for more information (**0800 319 6789, independentage.org/get-support**).



Our guide **If you're feeling lonely** has more ideas for staying connected.

“ Get out of the house every day if you can. Do gardening. Volunteer at a community garden if you haven't got one of your own or at a local wildlife area.

Spend time outside

Spending time in nature can really help your health and wellbeing.

Contact your local Mind to ask about ecotherapy programmes, which involve doing outdoor activities such as gardening, conservation or arts and crafts (**0300 123 3393**, [mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/how-nature-benefits-mental-health](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/how-nature-benefits-mental-health)) or ask your GP if there is one in your area they can refer you to.





6. How to help someone you're worried about

If you're concerned about somebody who seems to be experiencing anxiety, there are some simple things you can do to try to help.

- Talk to the person and find out how they feel, but don't put pressure on them to talk.
- Ask them how you can help – for example, you might be able to help them with breathing exercises. Resist the temptation to give advice.
- Reassure them that you are there if they need you.
- Learn about anxiety and the treatments available. You could help them to research support organisations or self-help resources.
- Anxiety is different for everyone. Learn to recognise the signs and find out what triggers their anxiety. Help them to stay positive and create coping strategies.



6. How to help someone you're worried about

- If they suffer from panic attacks, find out what to do when this happens. Visit [mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/for-friends-and-family](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/for-friends-and-family).
- Be patient and don't put them under pressure. If they ask for support, take things slowly and at a pace that suits them.
- Don't let anxiety become the main focus of your relationship. Encourage them to do things they enjoy. Look for activities outside the house that can help to distract them. You may want to find something you can do together, such as exercise, an art class or gardening.

If anxiety is affecting their daily life, you could try to encourage them to see their GP or talk to a therapist. You could help by arranging appointments or offering to go with them.



Help them plan what to say by using the medical appointment planner in our guide **Living well with long-term health conditions**.

Take care of yourself

It can be difficult to care for someone who experiences anxiety. It's important to look after yourself as well. Talk to your GP if you're finding it stressful and try not to take on too much.

Talking to others who are in a similar situation can be helpful. Carers UK has an online forum and may be able to put you in touch with a local support group (**0808 808 7777**, carersuk.org/help-and-advice/get-support/local-support).



See our guide **Caring for someone** for details of other support available.

You could contact the Mind Infoline for advice (**0300 123 3393**, mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines). Support organisations such as Anxiety UK (**03444 775 774**, anxietyuk.org.uk) or No Panic (**0300 772 9844**, nopanic.org.uk) can also offer advice and support.



Elsie's story

I've felt anxious for a long time, but I think I coped with it better when I was younger. In those days I was quite busy: I was bringing up a family, going out to work and caught up in day-to-day life. All of that distracted me from how I was feeling.

Now I'm older, sometimes I feel that my anxiety overtakes me. I find it hard to get going in the house and get the cleaning done. Then I look round at how messy it is and feel worse.

I feel most anxious when I have to attend something social. There are things in the past that I've enjoyed and now I hate going to them. It's anything to do with meeting people or going to a new place. I can't pinpoint exactly why I'm feeling this, but the anxiety seems to take over.

I told my doctor how anxious I was feeling. He suggested I see a counsellor and recommended someone. I found it incredibly difficult to talk about my feelings. I think they are deeply buried. But the counsellor was a lovely man and so kind.

I would suggest to anyone who is feeling anxious that they should get help. I've always talked to my daughters about how I'm feeling and it's so important to talk. You may have to wait to see a counsellor but it's worth seeing one if counselling will lift your anxiety even slightly, as it did for me.

I've found that what really helps me when I feel anxious is music. I've always loved music, ever since I was a young girl. Just listening to a piece of music I love calms me. Music is such a solace.

“ There are so many things that could help, and this is what helps me.

About Independent Age

At Independent Age, we want more people in the UK to live a happy, connected and purposeful later life. That's why we support people aged over 65 to get involved in things they enjoy. We also campaign and give advice on the issues that matter most: health and care, money and housing.

For information or advice – we can arrange a free, impartial chat with an adviser – call us on freephone **0800 319 6789** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 6.30pm) or email us at **advice@independentage.org**.

You can also support this work by volunteering with us, joining our campaigns to improve life for older people experiencing hardship, donating to us or remembering us in your will.

For more information, visit **[independentage.org](https://www.independentage.org)** or call us on **0800 319 6789**.



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