

## Anxiety and panic

### What is anxiety?

We all experience anxiety, when we feel stressed and overwhelmed by things that we have to deal with in life. Often mild anxiety can help to motivate us to do things or perform better, but at a severe level it can have a paralysing effect, stopping us doing things and generally spoiling our lives.

Anxiety relates to feelings of being threatened or frightened by something. Very often our past experiences, as well as our beliefs and attitudes, affect how we react in particular circumstances.

There are stressful life events, changes and personal crises that might make any of us feel anxious, for example:

- leaving home
- coping with work, exams and the demands of doing a degree
- problems with personal/sexual relationships
- loneliness
- financial problems
- bereavement and other losses.

In addition, some of us might feel particularly affected by some special situations, for example we might have:

- fears about going into new/social situations
- worries about asserting ourselves, dealing with people in authority
- fears about our health
- worries about making big decisions
- fears of being in an enclosed space, such as a lecture theatre (claustrophobia)
- fear of leaving the house, or being in the open (agoraphobia).

Sometimes we know that there is no obvious explanation of why this is so. Being anxious certainly does not mean that you are 'weak' or 'abnormal'. But you may need to address your anxiety if it starts to interfere with study or other aspects of your life.

### What anxiety feels like

Anxiety can be experienced as a range of feelings from uneasiness to severe panic. It is usually experienced in three ways:

**emotionally:** with feelings of fear and nervousness

**physically:** dry mouth, feeling sick or a churning stomach, heart beating faster than usual, sweating, shaking, wanting to go to the toilet all the time, breathing difficulties

**cognitively:** frightening thoughts, such as "I'm going to fail / making a fool of myself / losing control / I'm going mad" and so on.

At worst, anxiety and the fear of panic attacks can affect our life and behaviour in all kinds of ways: we may be unable to work or sleep, find ourselves avoiding people or places, or trying to cope by drinking or smoking too much.

### How you can help yourself

#### 1. Assess what causes you anxiety in your life and see if you can change this

Think about all the things which make you feel stressed, then see if there are any practical solutions you can adopt to reduce your anxiety. These could include:

- prioritising your time, making a realistic plan of action
- finding out information or getting feedback if you feel confused or unsure about something
- trying to live a 'balanced' life, spending time on different aspects of your life, eating well, sleeping, exercise, socialising as well as working

Confronting stressful situations rather than avoiding them often helps to reduce anxiety. Often the experience turns out to be not as bad as we imagined, and we can feel pleased that we chose to face the reality of the situation.

## 2. Question negative thoughts which make you feel more anxious

The way we think about a stressful situation, often makes it seem worse, as our emotional state can distort our thoughts. Try to stand back and evaluate things more realistically and calmly, to put your situation into perspective.

**don't judge yourself too harshly:** try to focus on your strengths and success as much as your failures and weaknesses; accept that no one is perfect, and don't expect too much of yourself

**don't 'catastrophise':** try not to see things in all or nothing terms, or assume failing in a situation would be the end of the world

**try not to worry excessively about the future:** trying to predict what is going to happen in the future, when we have no means of knowing, can make us feel very anxious; concentrate on dealing with present realities

**try not to compare yourself to others:** it's easy to assume everyone else is doing fine except you; actually, you don't really know how others are feeling or coping

## 3. Reassure yourself and learn to relax

Some people find that it helps, when they are in a stressful situation or having frightening thoughts, to reassure themselves with positive thoughts or distract themselves. You might try reminding yourself that you will be all right, or tell yourself to stay calm and you will feel better soon. You can try to focus your attention on something outside yourself, listening to a conversation or watching TV. This is not the same as avoiding situations, but helps you to stay in the stressful situation and learn to cope with it. Relaxation and breathing exercises can also help. (See separate leaflet on relaxation). It may help to join a relaxation class.

### How you can get further help

If you are feeling nervous or mildly anxious about things in your life, talking things over with a close friend, a family member or a friendly tutor may be helpful.

If you find that your anxiety is dominating your life and you are avoiding essential activities, having persistent frightening thoughts or panic attacks, then you should seek more specialist help. You could see your GP. Or you can contact one of the counsellors at Middlesex.

### How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:

<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling service or you can contact us at:

[cmh@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:cmh@mdx.ac.uk)

### SilverCloud – Online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

SilverCloud is available to all registered students and staff, a free online self-help service to help anyone experiencing a variety of emotional challenges.

SilverCloud offers secure, immediate access to online CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) programmes tailored to your specific needs to support you in setting yourself goals, problem solving and building up your life skills. These programmes have demonstrated high improvement rates for depression and anxiety.

There are currently four programmes available to students and staff:

- Anxious thoughts and feelings
- Depression and low mood
- Stress
- Body image

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