



Anxiety: How to calm spiralling thoughts

Making People Better

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The theme of 2023's Mental Health Awareness Week is anxiety. Despite anxiety being a completely normal emotion, there may come a point where it starts to impact your everyday life. With that in mind, our mental health experts have shared important information including what anxiety is, why it's different to worry, who suffers from it and how to manage negative thinking.

What is anxiety?

Worrying and stress is a completely natural and normal part of life. In fact, there are times when worrying can be helpful, making us feel more alert and prepared for the challenge ahead - such as for an exam or a job interview.

Anxiety has actually kept humans alive for millions of years. It was designed to protect and give us the skills necessary to fight or flight situations (you may know this as the fight or flight response).

However, worrying about lots of different things a lot of the time can leave you stuck in a vicious cycle where your worries may start to feel uncontrollable, impact your behaviours and intrude on your day-to-day life to a point where you can't function. We also know this as an anxiety disorder.



Anxiety and worry - what's the difference?



You'll often see the words anxiety and worry being used interchangeably, but it's important to recognise that they are different and have different implications for health and wellbeing.

When someone is worried or stressed they can usually pinpoint why, for example worrying about an exam or a work deadline. Worries reside in the mind, are grounded in reality, are usually temporary and don't tend to impact our ability to function.

On the other hand, anxiety tends to be long-standing and affects both the mind and the body. If you have anxiety, you may feel unsettled but can't put your finger on why. It's also worth noting that anxiety is marked by catastrophic thinking which can make problem-solving really tricky and often impacts someone's ability to cope with a negative outcome.

Who suffers from anxiety?

No one is immune to anxiety. In fact, it is one of the most common mental health problems we can face. In a survey carried out by the Mental Health Foundation, a quarter of adults said they felt so anxious that it stopped them from doing the things they want to do some or all of the time and six in ten adults feel this way at least some of the time.

According to world health data, it's thought that over 264 million people around the world have anxiety disorders and many more will go undiagnosed or suffer to a lesser extent, meaning that it's likely you, or someone you know, deals with the symptoms of anxiety.

It's worth noting that although many people live with anxiety, everyone's experience will be unique to them.

What are thinking traps and how do you manage them?



Getting caught up in thinking traps is common for anxiety sufferers. Thinking traps are the ways our mind convinces us that something is true, when in reality it is not. Whilst they may feel rational and truthful to you in the moment, these inaccurate thoughts only reinforce negative thinking patterns.

People with anxiety tend to worry about how they perceive something will impact them or others, rather than how something will actually impact them or others in reality. These are also known as thinking traps.

It's important to know that there are techniques that can help you break the cycle of negative thinking. We've created a helpful guide to help you first identify thinking traps when they occur and second, equip you with practical ways to manage them.

Thinking trap	What happens	How to manage it
Catastrophising	Blowing something out of proportion or imagining the worst will happen.	First recognise this as an irrational thought and then challenge its validity. Ask yourself - how likely is it that the outcome you are imagining will actually happen in reality?
Jumping to conclusions	Leaping to a negative conclusion without sufficient information to justify it.	Instead of using the word 'should' use the word 'could' or 'I want to'.
Word prisons	Thinking that you 'should' or 'shouldn't' behave in a certain way and feeling annoyed, angry or disappointed with ourselves when we fall short.	Write down the most common phrases you say using the word 'should', cross them out and rewrite them using the word 'could'. Notice how this removes the pressure and changes the intention of the sentence

<p>Emotional reasoning</p>	<p>Using our emotions as evidence for the truth. Regardless of the physical evidence, you believe whatever you're feeling at the time to be true.</p>	<p>Ask yourself - would this thought stand up if I were to bring it to court? It's important to understand that thoughts are not facts. Try to remember this when you're grappling with emotional reasoning.</p>
<p>Negative filter</p>	<p>Focussing on only the negative aspects of a situation or event and ignoring all the positives. As a result, everything in your own mind feels negative.</p>	<p>Write down your negative thoughts - for example, 'today is a terrible day' - then next to it, write down the evidence you have to support the thought.</p> <p>Then take a step back and reflect on the evidence. It's likely the evidence you've collected does not meet the reality.</p>
<p>Labelling</p>	<p>Attaching a negative label to yourself when you make a mistake, rather than acknowledging it as an isolated event.</p>	<p>Check in with someone else - a family member, friend or colleague - for perspective. Know that one incident or mistake does not tarnish you forever. Having someone else to speak to can help to neutralise this negative label.</p>

The small act of talking can make a big difference if you're experiencing anxiety. But we understand that talking isn't always easy. If you feel overwhelmed with anxiety and you're unable to manage this on your own, seek professional support from your GP.

