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Mental health and substance use
information you can trust



**Canadian Mental
Health Association**
British Columbia
Mental health for all

anxiety

Part of the Plain Language Series

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What is anxiety?

Anxiety is what we feel when we are scared and think that something bad might happen.

Anxiety is normal. Everyone feels anxiety at times.

Anxiety can help us. It warns us when we might be in danger and can help us get away from danger.

What does anxiety look like?

Anxiety is made up of three parts: thoughts, body sensations, and actions.

1. **Thoughts**—“Something bad is going to happen!”

Anxiety comes up when we think that something bad is going to happen.

Imagine that you have been invited to a party on the weekend. If you think that no one will talk to you, you will feel upset and wonder if you should even go. If you think that it will be fun, you will feel excited to go to the party.



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2. **Body sensations**—Getting ready to fight, run away, or freeze



You can feel anxiety in your body. You may feel your heart beating faster. You may feel like you cannot breathe. You may feel hot and sweaty. You may feel shaky. You may have an upset stomach.

These sensations are signs that your body is getting ready to take action. They may not feel good, but they cannot hurt you.

3. **Actions**—Fighting, running away, or freezing

We feel anxious when we feel threatened. These actions are the ways that we protect ourselves. We usually take action in three different ways:

- We may fight by acting out or talking back. “Hurry up! We are going to be late!”
- We may run away or try to avoid something. “I do not think that anyone will talk to me, so I will not join my coworkers for lunch.”
- We may freeze or have a hard time thinking clearly. “I do not know what to do!”



What is the difference between stress and unhelpful anxiety?

Stress:

- You know what is causing the feelings.
- The situation makes most people feel stressed.
- It does not change the way you act.
- It stops when the situation is over

Unhelpful anxiety:

- You do not always know why you feel anxious.
- Other people in the same situation would not feel very anxious.
- You act differently to avoid feeling anxious.
- The anxiety stays with you, even after the stress is gone.

How can I deal with anxiety?

It is important to remember that some anxiety is normal. We cannot get rid of all anxiety in our lives.

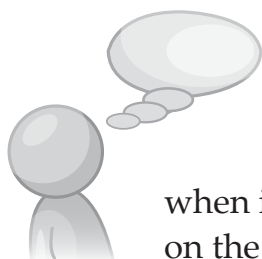
Anxiety is a problem when it gets in the way. We might avoid things or change the way we do things because we feel anxious.

Pretend that you are very anxious about taking tests at school. If you let anxiety get in the way, you may stop going to school.

Anxiety is also a problem when it comes up often, even when you are not in danger. People who have a lot of unhelpful anxiety may not even know why they feel anxious.

The goal is to deal with this unhelpful anxiety.

To deal with unhelpful anxiety, you need to take a closer look at what you are thinking when you are anxious. Next, you will need to look at how you act when you are anxious. Finally, you will learn a few ways to take care of yourself at home.



Part One: Thoughts

When we think something bad is about to happen, we react as if something bad will happen, even when it is not true. We also start focusing on the bad side of things. These negative thoughts add up. Soon, a small problem feels like a very big problem. This can make anxiety even worse.



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If you are very anxious about being late for work, you may start by worrying that your boss will be angry. Then you may worry about losing your job. It is easy to see how these thoughts quickly become overwhelming.

A big part of dealing with anxiety is dealing with the unhelpful thoughts that drive anxiety.



The first step is noticing your unhelpful thoughts. It may sound simple, but it can take practice. Most of us do not notice these thoughts.

Unhelpful thoughts that give us anxiety often start with “What if?” At the beginning, it may be easier to see unhelpful thoughts after the anxiety passes. With practice, you will start to notice these thoughts when they come up.

The next step is replacing your unhelpful thought with a realistic thought. In this step, you think about all sides of the situation. To help, you can ask yourself questions:

- Is there any proof to back up this thought?
- Have I thought about all sides of the situation? Is there anything I missed?
- Have I been in this position before? What happened then?
- What are the chances that the thought will come true?
- Even if the worst does happen, can I do anything about it?



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Once you have a realistic thought, use it to replace your unhelpful anxious thought.

If you are anxious about being late for work, a realistic thought might look like this:

“Most of us are late once in a while. In fact, I have been late before. My boss was a bit upset, but I did not lose my job.”

It is important to remember that thoughts are not facts. Having a thought does not mean it is true. It is just a thought.

Thinking about your thoughts may feel strange at first. With practice, it will become easier.

Part Two: Actions

When we are anxious, we can do things that make anxiety worse. We may avoid something that might cause anxiety. We may also avoid solving problems or taking action. Avoiding anxiety may make us feel better for a little while. But we then may feel worse because we are not solving the problem that is causing anxiety in the first place. We may also miss good things in life when we avoid things.

We run into problems when we let anxiety control what we do.

There are three different skills in this part. The skills you use will depend on the situation. First, you will learn about taking steps to face things that make you anxious. Second, you will learn how to solve problems. Finally, you will learn how to deal with worries that you cannot handle right away.



Stand up to anxiety

Do you avoid things because they make you anxious? Here are some tips to try:

- Think of what you are avoiding.
- Think of the steps it will take to reach your goal. Your steps can be as small as you need them to be.
- Decide when you will do each step. Set aside time to follow your steps.
- Remember to use your realistic thinking skills from Part One when you need them.

Pretend that you are scared of dogs. Here are steps you might take:

1. Read a book about dogs.
2. Watch a movie about dogs.
3. Watch dogs in the park.
4. Sit in the same room as a dog.
5. Pet a dog on a leash.
6. Pet a dog off a leash.
7. Go with a friend when they walk their dog.
8. Walk a dog by yourself.

Remember to challenge unhelpful thoughts when they come up. Take note of what you learn in each step. Pretend that you are petting a dog off a leash. An unhelpful thought says that the dog will bite you. But you have already petted a dog on a leash, and the dog did not hurt you. You can use this information to build more realistic thoughts.

If you have very strong fears that cause big changes in your life, it is best to talk to your doctor.

Solve problems

Part of standing up to anxiety is fixing problems. We know that ignoring problems can cause more anxiety. Now we will learn a way to solve problems.

1. Decide what the problem is. Try to be as exact as possible. It is easier to solve a problem when you know what needs to be fixed.
2. Think of different solutions or end goals. Think of as many as you can. Write them all down, even if they seem silly.
3. Pick the solution that you think will work best.
4. Decide what you need to do to try your solution. This is your plan. You can break your plan into smaller steps if you need to.
5. Put your plan into action. Remember to use skills you have learned, such as realistic thinking and standing up to anxiety.
6. Look back to see if your plan worked. If it did not work, pick a different solution from your list in Step 2 and make a new plan. Keep going until you find a solution that works.



Set a schedule

We may feel anxious about something that we cannot fix at the time. For example, we may worry about something at work when we are trying to go to sleep. We likely cannot solve the problem at night, but we can deal with the problem later.

In this case, you can schedule a time to deal with the worry.

- Write down the worry on a piece of paper.
- Decide when and what time you will deal with the worry.
- Set the paper aside until it is time to deal with it.



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Part Three: Taking care of yourself

We can do many little things at home to deal with anxiety. They do not take a lot of time, but they can make a big difference! Here are some things to try:

- **Try to get enough sleep every night.** It is easy to feel anxious and overwhelmed when you are tired. If you feel like you are too anxious to sleep well, it is best to talk to your doctor.
- **Try to exercise regularly.** Exercise is good for your body and your mind.
- **Take time to relax every day.** Our bodies and minds need time to relax. Find an activity that works for you. Yoga, reading a good book, or taking a warm bath are a few things to try.





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- **Talk with others about what worries you.** Fears can feel smaller when they are not just in your head. Friends, family, and counsellors can help you replace unhelpful thoughts with more realistic ones. Just remember that others should not do all the work. You need to practice realistic thinking on your own, too.
- **Plan for anxiety.** Events like moving into a new house or starting a new job can be stressful. The good news is they do not take you by surprise. You can plan how you will deal with these events ahead of time.



Panic

Panic attacks are bursts of very strong fear or anxiety. They start very suddenly, but they usually start to go away on their own in a few minutes. Here are the signs of a panic attack:

- Feeling like your heart is beating very quickly or loudly
- Feeling shaky or dizzy
- Feeling like you cannot breathe
- Sweating or feeling cold
- Feeling separated from things going on around you
- Feeling like you need to escape or run away
- Feeling like you may be dying

Panic attacks can be upsetting, but they cannot hurt you. Panic is normal when you are very scared. Many people have had a panic attack.

Panic attacks are a problem when they happen often. Some people are scared of having another panic attack. They may stop going places or doing things to avoid another panic attack.

It is important to talk to your doctor if panic is a problem.

What if I still have problems?

Anxiety is a problem when it comes up often or comes up a lot when we are not in danger. It is also a problem when we avoid doing things because we feel anxious.

It is important to talk to your doctor if you have problems with anxiety. Some physical and mental illnesses cause anxiety or panic.

If your doctor finds an illness called an anxiety disorder, they will start treatment. There are many treatments to try that can help.



Where can I go from here?

You can learn more about anxiety from these resources:

AnxietyBC

Visit www.anxietybc.com for more information on anxiety and anxiety disorders. You can watch videos and learn self-help tools to help you cope with anxiety at home. You can also download “how to” documents and order DVDs on managing anxiety.

Bounce Back program

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca/bounceback for information on the Bounce Back program. Bounce Back is for people dealing with low mood, stress or anxiety. Part of the program teaches you skills that help with anxiety. You learn skills from a DVD or you can talk to someone on the phone. The program is free. Talk to your doctor if you want to sign up for Bounce Back. Bounce back is run by the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Wellness Modules

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for the Wellness Modules. They include worksheets that help build good mental health. See the ones on stress, problem-solving and healthy thinking. Here to Help is the website of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.



Your local crisis line

A crisis line can help you when you are very upset. But they can help for a lot of other problems. They can help you find services in your community. You can also call if you just need to talk to someone. Call 310-6789. Do not put 604, 778 or 250 before the number. When you call 310-6789, you can talk to someone right away.

www.heretohelp.bc.ca

This booklet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. It is based on current research and resources. We also check key facts with doctors and other mental health experts. Please contact us if you want to know what resources we used.

primer fact sheets 2012



HeretoHelp is a project to the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are:

- AnxietyBC
- BC Schizophrenia Society
- Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division
- Centre for Addictions Research of BC
- FORCE Society for Kid's Mental Health
- Family Services of the North Shore, Jessie's Legacy Program
- Mood Disorders Association of BC

We work together to help people manage mental health and substance use problems. We are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services. It is an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.