

# SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO HAS ANXIETY



## What is anxiety?

Worry is a normal part of life and is helpful in some instances; it can focus our attention, mobilise our energy and activate problem-solving. Anxiety however, is a medical condition that is more than feeling stressed or worried; it is the persistent feeling of tension, irritability and dread which may feel uncontrollable and unwanted.

Anxiety occurs when the 'fight-or-flight' response – our involuntary response to a threatening situation – goes into overdrive. Anxiety impacts people in different ways, including difficulties with completing tasks at home or work, problems with social interactions and challenges in engaging with important activities and day to day life.

## A few facts about anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health conditions worldwide but they are frequently untreated<sup>1</sup>

There are several different types of anxiety, such as Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Panic Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Social Anxiety Disorder.

It is common for individuals to also experience depression and substance use conditions at the same time as an anxiety condition<sup>2</sup>

## What causes anxiety?

Anxiety disorders aren't developed or caused by a single factor but by a combination of things.

**Life events:** Anxiety can develop due to one or more stressful life events, such as work stress or change, pregnancy and birth, family and relationship conflict, major emotional shock following an adverse event, abuse or assault, death or loss of a loved one.

**Personal factors:** Some people may be more at risk due to having a family history of anxiety. They may also have certain personality traits such as excessive worrying, low self-esteem or have a strong need for control.

**Brain changes:** Factors such as genetic vulnerability, severe life stressors, some medication, drugs and medical conditions can result in issues with fear regulation in the brain.

## Signs and symptoms

Anxiety is a very individual experience and not everyone experiences anxiety in the same way. Symptoms can sometimes be hard to identify as they slowly develop over time. Someone experiencing anxiety may show the following signs:

- Visibly nervous, restless, or on edge.
- Panic attacks, hot and cold flushes, racing heart, tightening of chest or quick breathing.
- Difficulty concentrating, memory problems, or mind blanks.
- Irritability and aggression towards others.
- Avoiding dealing with problems or putting things off.
- Avoiding situations due to fear of increased anxiety.
- Excessive fear, worry, catastrophising or obsessive thinking.

## How you can help

Recognising anxiety early can make a big difference in someone's life. If you start to notice that a team member, friend or loved one seems to be experiencing levels of anxiety that stop them doing things they would otherwise be able to, it is important to help them seek professional help to get their health back on track.

- 1 BE AWARE**

Educate yourself about what anxiety is, how it can impact a person and what can help treat it. Make a note of what changes you have noticed and in a supportive, non-judgemental way let them know what you have observed. For example, you could say "I've noticed that you've been working long hours and haven't been talking as much at meetings, what's been going on?". Or, "I've noticed that you've stopped doing things you enjoy. Are you OK?".
- 2 SEEK SUPPORT FOR YOU BOTH**

Speaking to a professional, such as one of Benestar's clinicians, can help you put a support plan in place to help the person get on and stay on the road to recovery.
- 3 ASK THEM ABOUT THEIR GO-TO COPING STRATEGIES**

It is useful to have a list of "go-to" anxiety management strategies to help with the symptoms of anxiety. As a support person, simply asking the question plants the seed of self-management. If they are going to counselling, ask what they are learning and if you can help implement these skills in their daily routine.
- 4 ENCOURAGE ACTIVITY**

Regular physical activity is a good way to help prevent or manage mild anxiety by burning through stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Research shows that keeping active can help lift mood and improve sleeping patterns. You could encourage the person by offering to go on short walks or try walking meetings.
- 5 WORK THROUGH PANIC**

When someone is anxious, their breathing becomes faster and shallower and their throat and chest muscles can painfully contract. Notice if they are over-breathing, and deliberately slow down your breath as a model. Count to 3 as you breathe in slowly – then count to 5 as you breathe out slowly.
- 6 SHARE MINDFULNESS RESOURCES**

Anxiety can make a person imagine a dreadful future that is yet to happen. Mindfulness helps stay focused in the present and is a valuable anxiety management skill to learn. Try it out yourself – the Mind section on BeneHub contains a suite of guided meditation and breathing exercises.
- 7 SUPPORT LITTLE ACTS OF BRAVERY**

Avoiding what makes us anxious provides some relief in the short term but can make us more anxious in the long term. Common examples of avoidance behaviour at work include avoiding:

  - Making phone calls.
  - Making requests or asking for help.
  - Getting started on a task that feels intimidating (ranging from writing a report, completing an annual review for work, to choosing a new household appliance or what to wear in the morning).

Help the person to identify things they may be avoiding and support them to take small steps towards accomplishing the task. The key is to reduce the use/or avoidance as a coping strategy, without overwhelming them.

Remember, the way through anxiety is learning that one can cope with feelings of anxiety and learning and to trust that what is feared is a construct of the mind. You can support this growth by offering encouragement, advice, and support.

### NEED ASSISTANCE?

At Benestar we're always here to help. If you, or someone close to you is struggling with anxiety, contact us for confidential coaching and support.

Visit [Benestar.com](https://www.benestar.com) or call

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts>