



Adult Mental Health Team

# What is Anxiety?

## A guide to help you cope

## Recovery Focus

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This booklet has been designed by clinicians who are experienced in working with people with a wide range of mental health conditions.

The North and West adult mental health team work in collaboration with people to help them find a way to cope with their symptoms. This way of working is called a recovery approach.

The workbook is arranged across four key sections:

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>What is Anxiety? .....</b>              | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Challenging unhelpful thoughts.....</b> | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Coping skills and strategies.....</b>   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Graded exposure .....</b>               | <b>25</b> |

## 1

## What is Anxiety?

**In a nutshell, anxiety is the body's way of responding to being in danger. It is entirely natural.**

Our instincts stop us from doing dangerous things like stepping out in front of traffic. It becomes a problem when it is activated in situations which are not dangerous, causing discomfort and fear. This can result in problems leading a full life. Anxiety is often associated with other mental health issues.

### The fight or flight response

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Adrenaline helps us run away or fight. This happens whether the danger is real, or whether we believe the danger is there when actually there is none. It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism.

It works so well, that it often kicks in when it's not needed, when the danger is in our heads rather than in reality. We think we're in danger, so that's enough to trigger the system to go. People who get anxious tend to get into scanning mode, where they're constantly on the lookout for danger, hyper-alert to any of the signals and that makes it more likely that the alarm system will be activated.

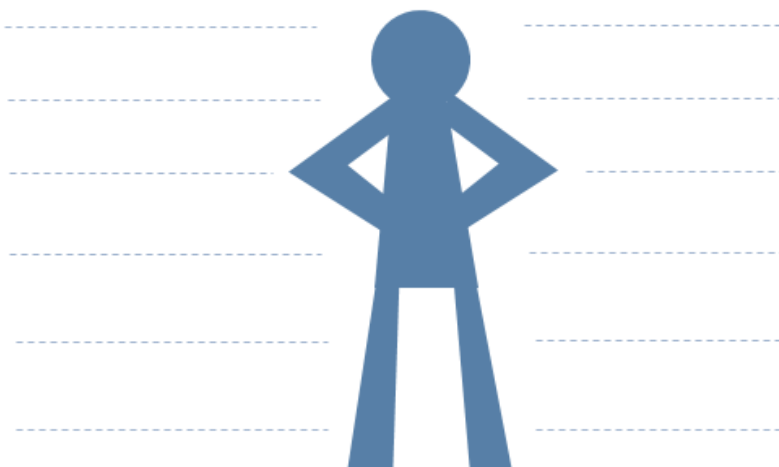
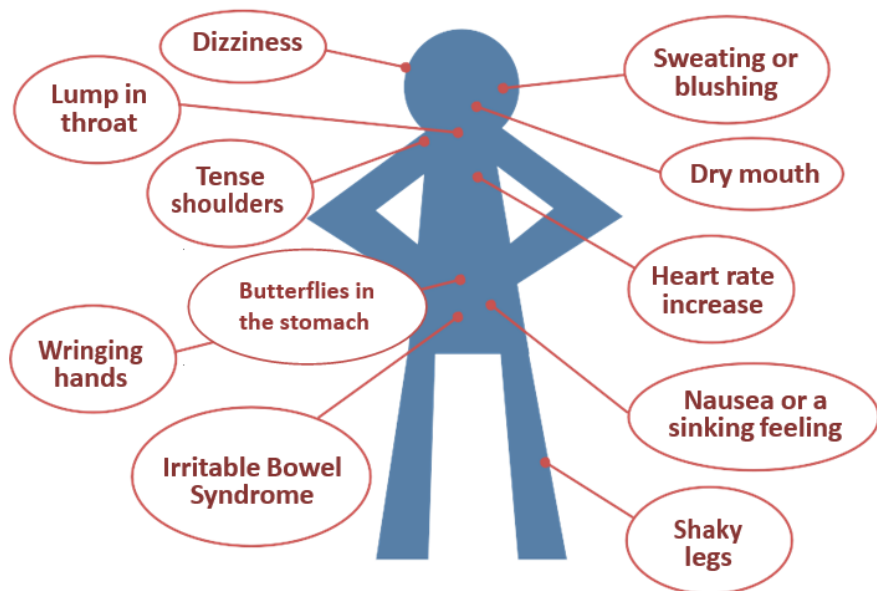
### How does Anxiety affect us?

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- Anxiety is a common feeling that many of us will experience at some point in our lives.
- It can affect any part of the body.
- We are all different. And may experience anxiety in different ways.

## The physiological symptoms of Anxiety

Look at the diagram below. Does anxiety affect you in these ways?  
Write below how Anxiety affects you...



## Typical thoughts

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Thoughts that often occur relate to our overestimating or exaggerating the actual threat and underestimating or minimising our ability to cope:

- *I'm in danger right now*
- *The worst possible scenario is going to happen*
- *I won't be able to cope with it*

When the physical symptoms kick in, the thoughts can soon escalate to things like:

- *I'm having a heart attack*
- *Get me out of here now*
- *I can't stand this...*

## Behaviours

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Things we do in response to feeling anxious include:

- Avoiding people or places
- Not going out
- Going to certain places at certain times, e.g. shopping at smaller shops, at less busy times
- Only going with someone else
- Leave early

While these may feel safe at the time they are sending a signal to your brain that reinforces the anxiety. The anxiety part of the brain thinks 'aha, I was right to warn about that situation so next time I'll start earlier'. So the problem gets worse if not confronted.

## Vicious Cycle of Anxiety



## Identifying triggers

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If you can identify what sets you off, then you are taking the first step to changing things.

What or when are the times when you are more likely to get anxious? If you can see the patterns, then maybe you can do something about those situations, and do something different.

- Certain places?
- Certain people?
- Anytime, anyplace?
- Seeing certain things?
- Hearing certain things?
- Thinking ahead to certain situation

## 2

## Challenging unhelpful thoughts

**Our thoughts can have an impact on our mood, anxiety and stress levels. Many of our thoughts are automatic and occur outside of our control and can be negative or unhelpful.**

When we are feeling low, anxious or stressed we may believe that our unhelpful thoughts are facts. It is important to remember to question these unhelpful thoughts as they can often be based on wrong assumptions.

This section of the workbook will help you learn how to recognise if you are thinking about things in an unhelpful or unrealistic way, and will provide you with some strategies that you can use to challenge these thoughts. By doing this, you can learn to see things in a more realistic light which can help to improve your mood.

You might have unhelpful thoughts about all kinds of things. The following page looks at some common examples.



**Unhelpful thoughts about yourself:**

I'm ugly

I'm a failure

I'm too anxious to manage that

**Unhelpful thoughts about others:**

No-one likes me

They think I am useless

Everyone is better than me

**Unhelpful thoughts about the world:**

Life is unfair

The world is a horrible place

**Unhelpful thoughts about the future:**

Things will never get better

I'm destined to fail

Something terrible may happen

These types of thinking may bring your mood and confidence levels down. Do you ever think in any of the ways outlined above?

## Patterns of unhelpful thinking

Firstly, you need to be able to recognise an unhelpful thought then you can learn to challenge it. Being aware of the common patterns when unhelpful thoughts follow can help you to recognise when you have them. Here are some examples:

| Unhelpful thinking pattern  | Examples  |
|---|---|
| <p><b><u>Predicting the future</u></b><br/>We may spend a lot of time thinking about the future and predicting what could go wrong. In the end most of our predictions do not come true and we have wasted time and energy worrying about them.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assuming you will perform poorly at your job interview.</li> <li>• Spending the week before an exam predicting that you will fail, despite all of your preparation.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b><u>Mind reading</u></b><br/>We may make assumptions about other people's beliefs without having any evidence. These ways of thinking naturally make us apprehensive.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My boss thinks I am stupid.</i></li> <li>• <i>People think I am weird.</i></li> <li>• <i>They do not like me.</i></li> </ul>  |
| <p><b><u>Catastrophising</u></b><br/>We may blow things out of proportion and assume something is far worse than it actually is.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believing a friend dislikes us because they cancelled a night out.</li> <li>• Believing we will get into serious trouble at work for calling in sick.</li> </ul>               |

| Unhelpful thinking pattern   | Examples  |
|--|---|
| <p><b><u>Negative filtering</u></b></p> <p>We may have a tendency to focus only on the negatives, which keeps our anxiety going.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing on the one person at work who doesn't like you.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b><u>Should statements</u></b></p> <p>We may spend a lot of time imagining how we would like things to be or how we feel they 'should be' rather than accepting how things are in reality.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I should have got that job.</i></li> <li>• <i>I should never be anxious.</i></li> </ul>   |
| <p><b><u>Overgeneralising</u></b></p> <p>We may assume that all other scenarios will follow a similar pattern in the future, based on one isolated incident.</p>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting one future work colleague whom you find irritating. As a result, worrying that everybody at work will be the same and you won't like anybody.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b><u>Critical self</u></b></p> <p>We may attach negative labels to ourselves and blame ourselves for things which are not our fault or responsibility.</p>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I am weak.</i></li> <li>• <i>I am a waste of space.</i></li> <li>• <i>I am always anxious.</i></li> <li>• <i>I am to blame.</i></li> </ul>                    |
| <p><b><u>What if statements</u></b></p> <p>We may find ourselves worrying <i>what if</i> something bad happens. This can make us avoid things.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What if I have a panic attack at the party?</i></li> <li>• <i>What if I don't make any new friends at work?</i></li> </ul>                                    |

Do any of your unhelpful thoughts fit into these common patterns?  
Fill in some examples in the table below:

| Unhelpful thought   | Which category is this? (tick all applicable)  |
|---|--|
| <i>"She must not like me and cannot be a real friend otherwise she would not have cancelled our plans."</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Predicting the future<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mind reading<br><input type="checkbox"/> Catastrophising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Negative filtering<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Should</i> statements<br><input type="checkbox"/> Overgeneralising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Critical self<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What if</i> statements |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Predicting the future<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mind reading<br><input type="checkbox"/> Catastrophising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Negative filtering<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Should</i> statements<br><input type="checkbox"/> Overgeneralising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Critical self<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What if</i> statements |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Predicting the future<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mind reading<br><input type="checkbox"/> Catastrophising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Negative filtering<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Should</i> statements<br><input type="checkbox"/> Overgeneralising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Critical self<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What if</i> statements |

| Unhelpful thought | Which category is this? (tick all applicable)   |
|-------------------|---|
|                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Predicting the future<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mind reading<br><input type="checkbox"/> Catastrophising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Negative filtering<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Should</i> state-ments<br><input type="checkbox"/> Overgeneralising<br><input type="checkbox"/> Critical self<br><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What if</i> statements |
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## How to challenge unhelpful thoughts

Once you have recognised an unhelpful thought the next step is to challenge it. This can help you to develop a more balanced thought that is accurate and based on evidence. To do this you can ask yourself a series of questions.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Unhelpful thought</b>   | <i>"I'm definitely going to fail my end of year exams"</i>  |
| <b>What category of unhelpful thinking is this?</b>                                | <i>"Predicting the future"</i>  |
| <b>Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?</b>                        | <i>"I've done well in previous exams"</i>   |
| <b>What would you say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?</b> | <i>"Try not to worry, you can only do your best"</i>  |
| <b>What are the benefits of thinking in this way?</b>                              | <i>"I can't really think of any"</i>  |
| <b>What are the costs of thinking in this way?</b>                                 | <i>"It is making me feel sick with worry"</i>   |
| <b>How will you feel about this in six months time?</b>                            | <i>"It probably won't seem like such a big deal"</i>  |
| <b>Balanced thought</b>  | <i>"Worrying about failing is doing me no good. I've always done well before so I should be fine, especially since I'm well prepared"</i> |

Try to challenge your unhelpful thoughts using the table below:

**Unhelpful thought:**

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|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>What category of unhelpful thinking is this?</b>                                |  |
| <b>Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?</b>                        |  |
| <b>What would you say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?</b> |  |
| <b>What are the benefits of thinking in this way?</b>                              |  |
| <b>What are the costs of thinking in this way?</b>                                 |  |
| <b>How will you feel about this in six months time?</b>                            |  |

**Balanced thought:**

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### 3

## Coping skills and strategies

**Anxiety is a natural reaction to something seen as a perceived threat (but remember it is your own perception, not necessarily a fact).**

Some anxiety can be helpful, for it sharpens the senses and alerts us to danger. For example:

*"This road is very busy and it could be quite dangerous when crossing, therefore I must be careful."*

In this example, we see that the anxious thought has alerted us to caution. It becomes a problem when it is activated in situations which are not dangerous. Anxiety only becomes a problem when it prevents us from getting on with everyday life and from doing the things we would like to do.

We have started to explore anxiety, its negative symptoms and how these impact on our mood and stress levels. The previous section of this booklet has aimed to assist in your challenging unhelpful thoughts, with practice this is an important part of overcoming your symptoms and distress.

This next section will help you explore strategies to introduce to help manage your distress. It is important to understand that as individuals we are all different and what works well for one person may be different for another. There are no right or wrong ways to describe anxiety as everyone experiences it very differently - what may make one person feel afraid, nervous or stressed may not affect another person.



## **Activity one:**

Relaxation and breathing exercises

### **Have you ever noticed what happens to your breathing when you get stressed?**

Your breathing pattern is affected by stress and anxiety and you can use your breath to control your stress response, the 'fight and flight' mode.

You can quieten your stress response and encourage the 'rest and digest' response by harnessing your breathing, focusing on it, and slowing it down.

The practice of breathing techniques will help to lower heart rate and blood pressure, increase digestive function and stimulate your body to repair hormones and help to clear your head.

### **Controlled breathing**

Focusing on and slowing down our breathing patterns can be found to be very helpful, particularly if feeling dizzy or light headed when stressed or anxious.

Find yourself a comfortable position. Focus on working out a stable breathing rhythm. Try breathing in for three seconds, hold this for two seconds and then breathe out for three seconds. It can be helpful to count as you do this.

There are many different breathing techniques which can help you combat the negative symptoms.

## Muscle relaxation exercise

Find somewhere comfortable and quiet where you won't be interrupted. You can either sit or lie down to practice this exercise.

Begin by focusing on your breathing. Try to have a slow and comfortable pace. You could use the controlled breathing technique described earlier. Do this for a few minutes to prepare for the muscular relaxation exercise.

The main aim of this exercise is to allow your body to start to recognise when you feel stressed and when you feel relaxed.

Try to tense each muscle group for around five seconds. Don't tense the muscle too tight. Focus on the sensations that this brings. Then relax your muscles for a similar length of time, and again, focus on how this feels. Then move onto the next muscle group. Try to remember to keep your breathing at a comfortable pace throughout.

Below are some suggestions of muscle groups that you may wish to work through:

- **Legs:** point your toes and tense your muscles as if you were trying to stand up
- **Stomach:** tense your stomach muscles
- **Arms:** make fists and tense your muscles as if you were trying to lift something
- **Shoulders:** shrug your shoulders. Lift them up towards your ears
- **Face:** make a frowning expression. Squeeze your eyes shut and screw up your nose. Clench your teeth.

## Activity two:

### Wristband

**The wrist band provide you with a tool that you can use as a reminder for how to control your anxiety. Please note this is not an anxiety treatment.**

One of the major issues that affect those with anxiety is this feeling that they are inside their own head. They feel like they are so lost in thought that they cannot seem to focus on enjoying life.

The wristband anxiety tool is designed to take you out of your own head and snap you back into reality. It's designed to get you to stop over-thinking and prevent anxiety from getting worse.

You use the technique as follows:

1. Pick a rubber band or elastic wrist band, it must be able to snap. Make sure you choose one that you are willing to wear every day
2. Decide what you want to say to yourself or remember, for example, a happy fun thought, a positive or momentous occasion or thoughts of a special person
3. Snap the rubber band against your wrist three times (it may sting a little). Repeat what you want to remember as you snap it.
4. Then, any time you have anxiety, snap it back and repeat to yourself what you needed to remember, whether it's the affirmation or the tips for overcoming your panic attack or anxiety.

You can use a wrist band, rubber band or hair band. Anything that can go on your wrists comfortably can potentially provide the same benefits.

## Activity three:

### Distraction and Mindfulness

**Distraction is a useful technique to tackle symptoms of anxiety and stress when you feel overwhelming. This can give you space to deal with a situation in a more considered and positive manner. It is also helpful when you don't have the space or time to use a more proactive approach, such as a relaxation exercise.**

Distraction simply involves trying to take your mind off uncomfortable symptoms or thoughts. You can do this by trying to focus on something unrelated. Often this helps them to pass.

Ideas to help distract you from your troubling thoughts or anxiety include:

- Try to appreciate small details in your surroundings
- Focus on your breathing, for example, how it feels to breathe in and out
- Visualise being in a pleasant, safe and comfortable environment
- Listen to your favourite music. Try to pick out all the different instruments and sounds that you can hear.

As with any relaxation exercise, it may take a few minutes before you begin to feel like it's working.

## Mindfulness

It can be easy to rush through life without stopping to notice much. Paying more attention to the present moment, your thoughts and feelings and to the world around you can improve your mental wellbeing. Some people call this awareness mindfulness and you can take steps to develop it in your own life.

Good mental wellbeing means feeling good about life and yourself and being able to get on with life in the way you want. Becoming more aware of the present moment means, noticing the sights, smells, sounds and tastes that you experience as well as the thoughts and feelings that occur from one moment to the next. Several practices can help create a new awareness of body sensations, thoughts and feeling.

Yoga and Tai chi are also helpful and valuable exercises.

### **Try the following mindful exercise:**

Sitting silently, paying close attention to an object. This could be a picture or a piece of fruit. Focusing in detail on the item will help distract your thoughts away from your negative symptoms. Look closely at the item, how does it feel? How does it smell? Describe the colours, what does it remind you of? If fruit what would it taste like? Paying great attention to your breathing at the same time as focusing can help bring your attention back to focusing on relaxing.

## Activity four:

### Counting

**Counting can be a technique to assist in your focusing away from your negative symptoms. If you find yourself in a stressful situation focusing on slowing your breathing and counting back from one thousand in multiples of seven could be a technique to practice. Also, choosing and counting things that you see that begin with a certain letter.**

It is important with all of these techniques to remember that everybody is individual – what works for one, may not work for another. The most important thing is to practice regularly.

### **Anxiety symptom diary**

At the end of this booklet there is an anxiety symptom diary which may help you to manage your anxiety through noting which strategies have worked for you. Fill it in after coping with an anxiety-provoking event or situation.

## 4

**Graded exposure**

**This last section will help you understand the importance of not avoiding scenarios that make you feel anxious, this will only fuel your anxiety. By understanding what is making you feel anxious you can start to put in place a plan to gradually help you combat your fears.**

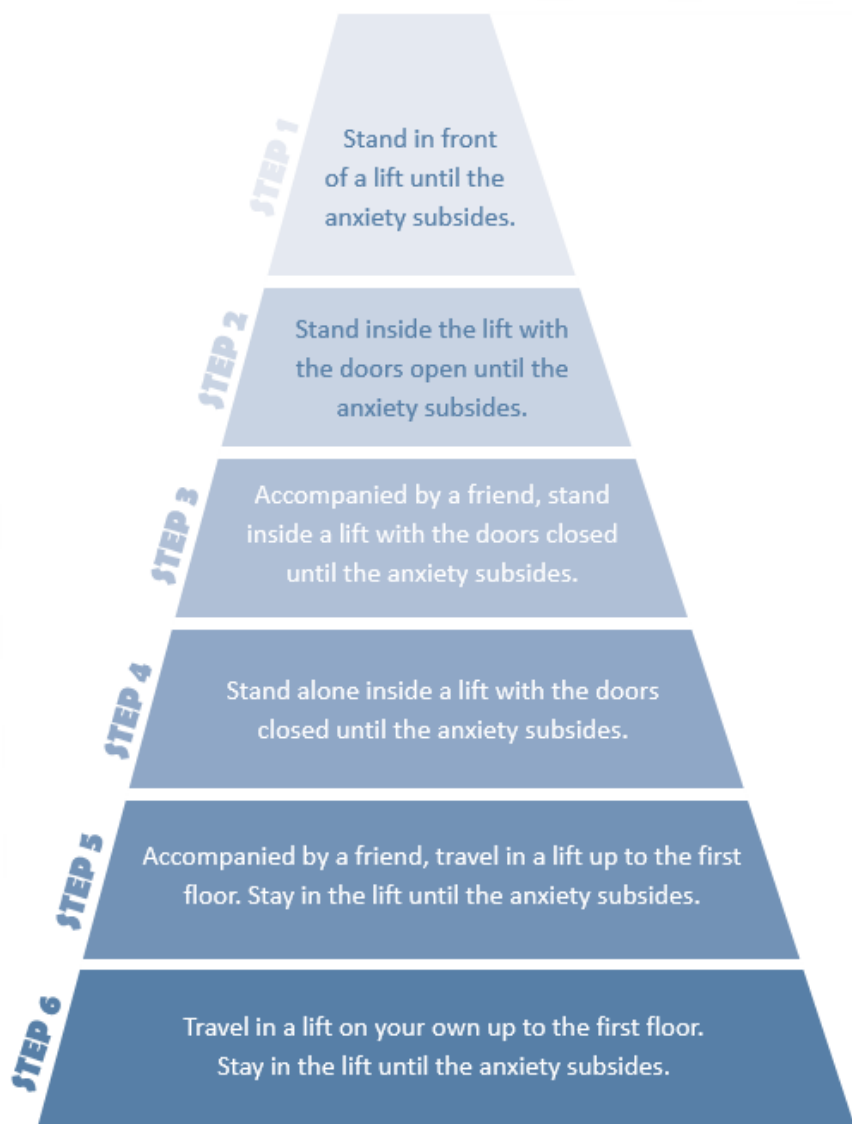
Graded exposure simply involves remaining in a situation long enough for the anxiety to subside. If choosing to use exposure, it is particularly important to ensure that you introduce yourself incrementally to the anxiety-provoking situation in measured doses.

Respite from the anxiety-provoking situation is only permitted once you can feel that your anxiety has decreased significantly. If you remove yourself from the situation before this occurs, you risk negatively reinforcing your avoidance behaviour instead.

Prepare for the exposure by practicing key coping strategies such as slow breathing, muscle relaxation and mindfulness. Using these strategies at the time of exposure will help you to learn different ways of dealing with your anxiety when it heightens. It is important that you practice these skills outside the context of the anxiety provoking situation first, to ensure you feel confident in your ability to apply the strategies in your time of distress.

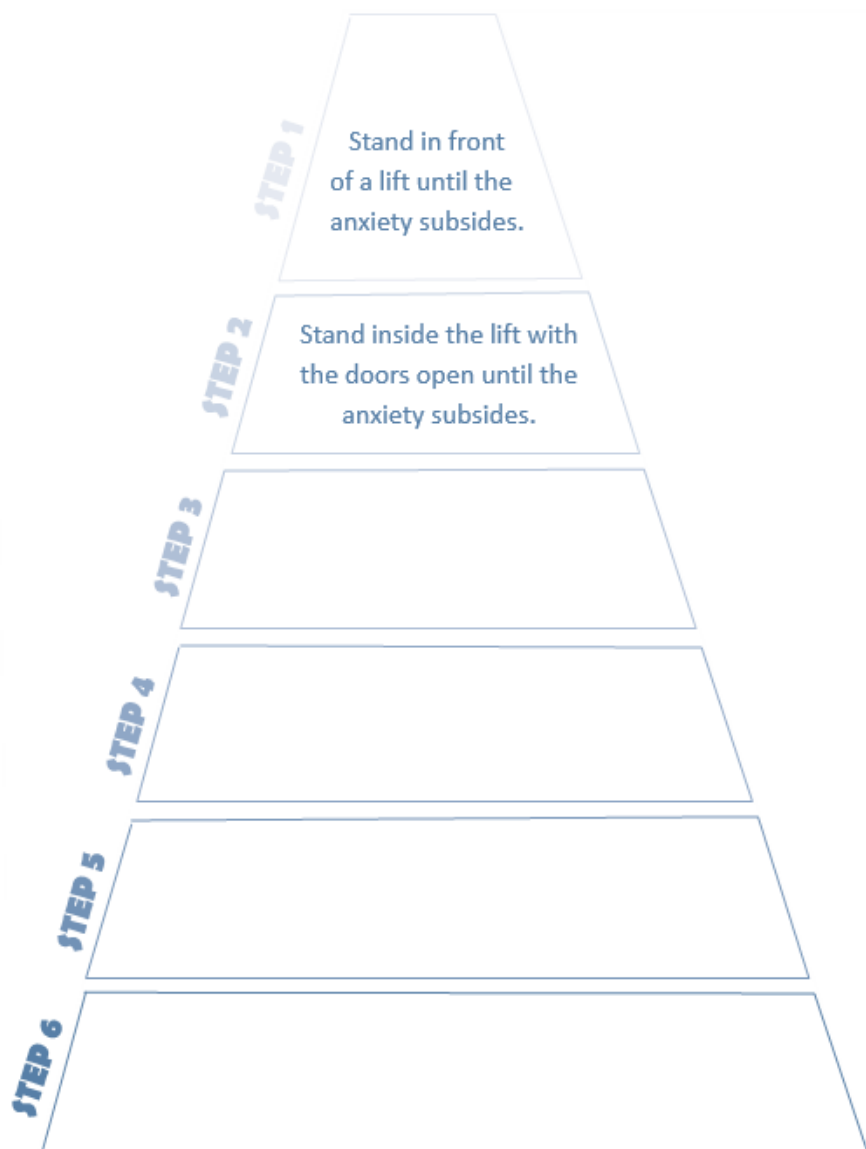
Grading the exposure is important to ensure you gain experience of the anxiety without avoiding it and to practice the coping strategies. Start off by exposing yourself to stimuli that will evoke lower levels of anxiety in order to build your confidence. Over time, you will find that you become more able to face a stimuli that would initially have triggered a more intense response.

The example shown here illustrates how a person with a fear of lifts could approach a programme of graded exposure:





Have a think about what the hierarchy might look like for a situation you find anxiety provoking. Start at the top of the triangle and work through each step at your own pace.



You need to continue to practice each step until it no longer evokes excessive anxiety. Then repeat the same process with the next step.

In this manner, the association between the situation and the anxiety is weakened. It is important that you decide the individual graded steps because you know the specific things that will evoke an anxious response and to what level of intensity. Having a plan can assist in helping to build your confidence, and remember to use your learned skills... *"feel the fear and do it anyway!"*

Some people give up with grading their exposure to things that make them feel anxious. They do not consider that they have made any progress, even though other people can see a change in them. Progress is always slow in the beginning. But be mindful of the changes you are likely to miss, because it's the small changes that build up to bigger improvements later.

Praise yourself when you succeed in any way, regardless of how small the achievement and make a point of giving yourself a mental pat on the back. This will help to build up your confidence and keep you motivated. Perhaps ask someone else to note your achievements or tell a family member or friend about your successes.

Reward yourself to celebrate the success and decide in advance what you would like that to be. Write on a card the target you will accomplish in order to earn the treat. Pin it up somewhere obvious and remind yourself to look at it.

## Setbacks

Everyone experiences setbacks from time to time. What seemed to have worked yesterday may seem more challenging and difficult on another day. Setbacks are a normal part of progress so do not be discouraged by them.

When a setback occurs, such as starting to feel anxious in a situation you felt you had begun to manage, just consider the target you previously set. Is there a way you could approach the target differently yet still achieve it?

A person may experience a setback at any point in their anxiety management practice, but particularly if you are attempting an over ambitious step. So try to find smaller steps on the way to your target, and practice what you have planned before doing it. You can try the difficult thing again or returning to that anxiety provoking stimuli when your confidence has returned. But as long as you continue to practice you will still be doing something to help overcome your anxiety. So expect setbacks. They are part of the anxiety management process.

We hope you have found this booklet helpful. Keep it to reflect upon. It could be a useful tool to assist in your learning about anxiety and combating its negative symptoms.

Anxiety is a common difficulty, it can be overcome and people do conquer their symptoms: **practice, practice, practice!**

# Anxiety symptom diary

| Situation<br><i>What has made you feel anxious?</i> | Anxiety level<br><i>0 = calm<br/>10 = very anxious</i> | Thoughts, feelings and behaviours experienced |
|---|--|---|
|   |  |   |

| <b>Coping strategies</b><br><i>eg. challenging thoughts, relaxation</i> | <b>Revised anxiety level</b><br><i>0 = calm</i><br><i>10 = very anxious</i> |
|---|---|
|   |   |

## Notes

If you have any concerns, complaints or comments about your experience of our service then please tell a member of the team or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on freephone 0800 328 7971.

## Notes

### **Developed by**

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These booklets were created specifically to assist our set 4 follow up sessions identified for clients following assessment, to assist with understanding of symptoms, learning strategies to promote coping, facilitate recovery and promote well-being. We have received some wonderful feedback from clients and clinicians during the developmental stages which has been incorporated into the booklets.

If you would like to have information translated into a different language, please contact the Equality and Diversity Team at: [EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)

**Arabic** يُرجى الاتصال بنا إذا كنتم ترغبون في الحصول على المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتسبيق مختلف.

**Bengali** আপনি এই তথ্য অন্য ভাষায় বা আলাদা আকারে পেতে চাইলে অনুগ্রহ করে আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন।  
**Urdu** اگر آپ یہ معلومات دیگر زبان یا مختلف فارمیٹ میں چاہتے ہیں تو برائے مہربانی ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

**Chinese** 若要以其他語言或格式提供這些資訊，請與我們聯繫

**Polish** Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku lub w innym formacie, skontaktuj się z nami.

**Portuguese** Queira contactar-nos se pretender as informações noutra idioma ou num formato diferente.

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