

What is Anxiety?

Everyone has experienced anxiety at some point within their life, most commonly occurring at times of stress or situations involving nerves. To define it, "Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe". The latter phrase is significant, some people rarely encounter anxiety thus taking little notice of it, whilst others it can determine how they go about every task in life. Some may feel anxiety whilst having a job interview, whilst others may be unable to get out of bed due to it. Everyone's situation is different; however, no one should ever be alone.

There are several different types of anxiety, each with particular symptoms and treatments. As with many mental health conditions, it is difficult to pinpoint causes and anyone suffering should never blame themselves. Mental illness and anxiety are like any other health problems such as heart disease or diabetes, therefore no one should ever disregard its significance or play it down. I'll address a couple types that I have experienced/know of otherwise I'll be here all day:

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is a long-term condition that causes you to feel anxious about a wide range of situations and issues, rather than a singular event. For example, someone with GAD experience anxiety almost every day and struggle to be relaxed for an extended period of time. Around 5% of the UK population suffer from GAD and it most commonly affects those from the ages 35-59. Symptoms of GAD include:

- Restlessness,
- Worry
- Trouble concentrating or sleeping
- Dizziness
- Heart palpitations.

Social anxiety disorder or social phobia is also long term, it is an overwhelming fear of social situations such as meeting with friends, family occasions or simply being outside. It often starts

during teenage years and can have a huge impact on your life. People may think its just part of growing up and being shy, but it is much more of a prominent issue. Symptoms of this disorder include:

- Worry and/or avoidance of social situations
- Fear of embarrassment and/or appearance
- Fear of judgement and/or attention
- Feeling nauseas, sweating and heart palpitations
- Panic attacks

As mentioned, particular causes of anxiety are hard to acknowledge and everyone's experiences are different. However, several factors are known to have possible contributions to the disorder, these include:

- Overactivity in the emotion department of the brain
- Imbalance of the brain chemicals serotonin and noradrenaline (mood controllers)
- Parents genes (5x more likely to suffer GAD if a close relative has)
- History of stressful or traumatic experiences e.g. domestic violence
- Long term health conditions e.g. arthritis

However, a lot of people develop GAD and other types of anxiety for no apparent reason, therefore no one should ever feel at fault. Treatments and help are available, there is no quick fix or magic bean that makes it all go away, but no one is ever alone.

Common treatments are like many health issues, seeing your local GP is immensely helpful, especially if you struggle with talking about it. They will listen and offer the best advice in order to help (trust me they do want to help even if they seem like they don't). Other treatments include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which helps define the negative patterns and behaviours that may contribute to your anxiety and mental health. Do not worry this does not have to involve you lying on them long sofas talking about your life story whilst a therapist writes things down. It can be done with friends and family or anyone you feel comfortable talking to.

For those with more severe cases of anxiety, antidepressant medicines can be prescribed by your local GP if they feel you require them. They sound very scary and are not miracle workers, but they can be very helpful in the long term. They are a type of medicine called a selective reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), such as escitalopram or sertraline, which combat the possible chemical imbalance in your brain. They are not “happy pills” and do not change you as a person, from my own personal experience they prevent you from feeling down for extended periods of time.

Support groups and online forums are also effective treatments, hearing about other people’s experiences and relating to them is extremely helpful when fighting your own battle. Never bottle anything up, talking about it is the best possible treatment.

How anxiety affects me...

Mentally...

Since my mid-teens I have suffered from anxiety. It became apparent at the age of 16 that I suffered from social anxiety disorder. Sixth form was a huge change for me personally, going from a quiet individual who would rarely socialise to someone who wanted to host huge house parties every week. Having lots of friends and going out all the time was all new to me, it was great at first and I loved the popularity however it became apparent mid-way through sixth form that this lifestyle was not for me. I began to stress about every social situation, and I kept up this persona of a lively, jokey party animal who did not have a care in the world (“lord sesh” for those that know me). I often hid away from addressing my true feelings as I thought I thrived off attention, which I now know is definitely not the case. Still to this day I am anxious about meeting with people, I just want to be myself and not pretend to be someone else. In essence all I care about is my beloved Huddersfield Town and memes that me and my good friend Tom Winter share to each other. My social anxiety causes me to worry in any situation and I often overthink about how people are judging me. I create extreme situations in my end and always replay what I have said to people once I have had that social interaction, often resulting in a low mood.

Going to University was also a large test for my mental health. I gave up with the persona I had in sixth form and focused more on myself as I knew I was emotionally vulnerable still. My social anxiety was not helped when I was put into a flat with no one who made an effort with each other. I was not expecting to meet friends for life, but that particular situation made me feel very isolated and prevented me from perhaps trying to meet new people outside of the accommodation. Overall, I'd say my University experience has been difficult and I have struggled at times, but I don't regret any of my decisions and I am looking forward to September and my final year.

Nowadays my social anxiety is still with me, however I understand it and I am able to manage it more effectively. Whenever a social occasion is being organised my automatic thoughts are "what's a good excuse" or "how do I get out of this", I have to break down every single part of the occasion and see what potential triggers of anxiety are. All these thoughts are done within a split second and I rarely think otherwise. During any social situation I dislike being the centre of attention as it creates more anxiety for me, I prefer smaller groups and occasions over large gatherings, basically I prefer situations that I feel I have the most control over myself.

The lockdown has had a significant effect on my mental health, at first I enjoyed being in my own company and not having to leave the house but after the first couple months I began to feel very isolated and my mood started to dip. Now that life is starting to go back to normal, I feel very anxious to start doing the regular things outside of home and socialising. I am aware that many people feel the same way and I am glad to relate to others who share my feelings. I think taking things slow is the best way and not forcing myself to step out of my comfort zone just yet. As time passes, I strongly believe my mind will go back to normal (pre lockdown).

Physically...

Having anxiety has also impacted my life physically. In a social situation where I feel anxious, I become very fidgety and self-aware, my attention darts from one thing to another and I cannot relax. When there is eating or drinking involved, I often feel nauseas and have an upset stomach. To overcome this, I will either take myself away from the social situation or fight it

there and then, known as the fight or flight response. I believe fighting it and dealing with it there and then is better than bottling it up.

Panic attacks are something that I have experienced, but thankfully I have not had one for over two years now. For me it was sudden and rapid increase in my breathing leading it to become uncontrollable and often leaving me unable to move. There was no specific trigger however a sudden spike in anxiety was often the cause. I am happy I no longer suffer from panic attacks however the thought of them is still very scary.

Ways friends can help

Be understanding – anxiety and depression are difficult to understand as it is, but when every person's experience is different it's an almost impossible task. No one can remove someone's anxiety or depression, but simply doing a bit of research on it can do the world of good. If someone suddenly cancels plans or is reluctant to attend a social gathering do not jump to conclusions. Examples being "they're so boring" or "they don't like us". Maybe think if there is something going on in their life and understand that everyone is different. Do not feel like there's nothing you can do, but at the same time do not think you can solve it.

Ask if they're okay – everyone asks "how are you" and "you alright" with the generated response being "yeah I'm fine" 99% of the time. But if one of your good friends seems a bit off maybe ask them personally "how are things at home" or "you seem slightly off is everything okay". These questions are really awkward but at the same time they could be crucial in helping out someone's own battle. In my experience having someone listen to you is just as good as them giving you advice.

Know your limits – ultimately mental health is an illness, if you know someone is suffering do the first steps above as mentioned but know you are not a miracle worker. You cannot cure someone of anxiety or depression. From my experience it is a very personal battle, you have to know what is best for you before you can allow others to help you. Suffering in silence is not good but you have to be strong and fight a lot of it yourself, there's nothing wrong with being

selfish when you are struggling. Your mind is your mind and that will never change. Only you know what is best for you. Never rely on someone else to fight your own battle and at the same time do not try and fight someone else's. Friends and family help a lot but having strength within yourself is fundamental and you will get through it.

Simple tips and helpful resources

- Exercise – was always an escape for me and helped more than I realised, healthy body does equal a healthy mind
- Music – a lot of music I listen to is relatable and it helps me relax and take my mind off things. Also motivated me to do a lot of things
- Social media – be extremely careful about stuff you see; someone may seem very happy according to their posts, but you never truly know what someone is going through
- Talking – doesn't have to be about your troubles! Talking is the first step to overcoming anything. Bottling it up is the absolute worst thing you can do, its awkward at first but you will not regret it once you speak out
- Headspace – good app I used that focuses on mindfulness and breathing techniques
- Help – do not google your symptoms, GP's and the NHS website are the best places to start. Help is always available no matter what the situation
- Family and friends – they are there for you no matter what. One friend/one family member can be enough! They won't solve anything on the spot, but a listener is a lot of help
- Distract yourself – don't lie in bed listening to sad music, it's a recipe for disaster. Take up new hobbies and do the things you love
- Be yourself – your mind is the greatest weapon, do not put it in a false state. Don't act how someone wants you to act

A friend's perspective...

My experience with anxiety has gone hand in hand with my experience with stress, which has been effectively lifelong and a vicious circle in which my anxiety has aggravated my stress and my stress has in turn added to my level of anxiety.

I have experienced anxiety on a consistent basis, never to a debilitating level but on a low grade and constant level throughout my daily life, small things add up to have a big effect. Normally new situations, eating at a restaurant I've never been to without people I feel okay with, getting on a bus, when I was younger I had such an aversion to trains and public transport it stopped me from doing quite a lot of things.

About the authors

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Known each other since sixth form and have almost everything in common

Get Involved...

We would love to get as many people involved in creating these resources as possible! If you are a young person living with a chronic illness, disability, or long term health condition, and would be interested in making a similar resource based on YOUR experiences, we would love to hear from you! You can email us at thelunaprojectuk@gmail.com ! You can also find us on social media @thelunaprojectuk !