

This type of short-term anxiety is common and can even be useful e.g. feeling nervous before an exam can motivate you to revise, make you feel more alert, and enhance your performance.

However, if feelings of anxiety are out of proportion or seem overwhelming, you may have an anxiety disorder.

If anxiety stays at a high level for a long time, you may feel that it is difficult to deal with everyday life. You may feel powerless, out of control, as if you are about to die or go mad. Sometimes, if the feelings of fear overwhelm you, you may experience a panic attack.

Physical and mental symptoms of Anxiety

Physical effects – short term:

- Increased muscular tension can cause discomfort and headaches.
- Rapid breathing may make you feel light-headed and shaky, and give you pins and needles.
- Rising blood pressure can make you more aware of a pounding heart.
- Changes in the blood supply to your digestive system may cause nausea and sickness.
- You may feel an urgent need to visit the toilet, and get 'butterflies' in your stomach.

Physical effects - long-term:

Fear combined with tension and lack of sleep can weaken your immune system, lowering your resistance to infection.

You may experience digestive difficulties.

You may also feel depressed.

Psychological effects

Anxiety can make you more fearful, alert, on edge, irritable, and unable to relax or concentrate. You may feel an overwhelming desire to seek the

reassurance of others, be over-cautious and avoid situations which may trigger anxiety.

The way you think can be affected: if you fear that the worst is going to happen, you may start to see everything negatively and become very pessimistic. For example, if a friend is late, you may imagine and worry that he or she has had an accident or doesn't want to see you; even though your friend may simply be late because their train was delayed.

Impact on work, leisure and relationships

Anxiety is a normal physical reaction. However, if your anxiety is severe, you may find it difficult to hold down a job, develop or maintain good relationships, or simply to enjoy leisure time.

Sleep problems may make your anxious feelings even worse and reduce your ability to cope.

For some people anxiety becomes so overwhelming that it takes over their lives. They may experience severe or very frequent panic attacks for no apparent reason, or have a persistent 'free-floating' sense of anxiety. Some people may develop a phobia about going out, or may withdraw from contact with people – even their family and friends. Others have obsessive thoughts or compulsive behaviour, such as endlessly washing their hands or constantly checking things. For others they may develop fears and worries about their health or about particular situations or objects. (Please see the information related to specific anxiety disorders).