



Mental Health  
Ireland

# Anxiety

*A Pocket Guide on  
How to Manage and  
Live with Anxiety*

Mental Health Ireland is a national voluntary organisation whose mission is to educate, empower and connect communities.

## OUR VISION

Mental Health Ireland's vision is for an Ireland where mental health is understood, valued, and supported as an essential part of everyone's health. Mental Health Ireland will lead the way in creating a culture where everyone is treated with respect and supported, especially when our mental health is challenged.

Many different people's perspectives and voices supported the creation of this booklet through a process of coproduction. Coproduction is a strengths-based process that looks to incorporate the end user as an equal participant from the very beginning and throughout the process, planning, development, delivery, and evaluation. We want to thank everyone who participated in this work, and we hope that this booklet provides information, support and guidance.

This is a new coproduced version of our Anxiety Booklet, some of the information from the original has remained and was sourced from the Mental Health Foundation.

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Welcome to our coproduced guide on anxiety, part of a series of booklets by Mental Health Ireland. These booklets use simple, easy-to-understand language to support your wellbeing.

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## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling of fear or worry and one of the most common mental health issues. Anybody can experience anxiety in everyday situations; it can be especially high when we are going through stressful life events or changes.

### Stress and anxiety are similar, but not the same.

Stress usually happens because of a **specific cause**, which can be short-term or long-term. Some examples can be a deadline, an argument, or a health problem. When you are stressed, you might feel tired, angry, have muscle aches, stomach problems, or trouble sleeping.

*Anxiety happens when you become fearful and want to avoid situations that might make you feel more anxious.*

Anxiety is different because it does not always have a clear cause. It's when you constantly feel worried or nervous, **even when nothing specific is wrong**. Anxiety can cause the same symptoms of stress, like trouble sleeping, feeling tired, tense muscles, and being easily irritated (APA, 2022).



Some people may experience levels of anxiety that can interfere with their quality of life. However, a low level of anxiety can be a **useful motivating force**, for example when trying something new for the first time, having a deadline or sleeping through an alarm.

It is important to be able to recognise the different forms of anxiety and how they can affect us, as well as adopting positive coping strategies. Seeking help is often the first step in learning how to cope.



#### **Anxiety can become a problem if it:**

- Is ongoing/constant
- Becomes overwhelming
- Gets in the way of daily life

#### **This booklet explores:**

- What anxiety is
- How anxiety can affect us
- What to do if you are experiencing anxiety

## **WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY?**

There can be many causes of anxiety, and what causes one person anxiety may not have the same effect on another person.

### **The most common causes of anxiety are:**

- Relationships (this can be with family, friends or colleagues)
- Loss of a loved one
- Loneliness
- Ageing
- Personal or a loved one's health issues
- Medications
- Social media
- Life events
- Work
- Money
- News





## WHAT DOES ANXIETY FEEL LIKE?

Anxiety feels different for everyone, some common signs are listed below.

### In your body



- Muscles may feel weak
- Difficulty eating
- Fast or irregular heartbeat
- Hot and cold sweats
- Feeling dizzy
- Fast breathing
- Appetite changes
- Changes in digestion

### In your mind



- Feeling worried all the time
- Feeling fear/dread
- Feeling unable to focus
- Loss of self-confidence
- Low mood
- Racing thoughts



### In your behaviour

- Feeling frozen to the spot
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Being more irritable, isolated or withdrawn than usual
- Eating too much or too little

**You can learn to cope with your anxiety, so it doesn't stop you from enjoying life.**

These feelings can be confusing or overwhelming, especially if you do not know why they are happening. It is important to know that your body and mind are trying to protect you. When they sense fear, they prepare for what they think might be an emergency, even when there's no real danger.

This is called the **fight, flight or freeze response**.

- **Fight:** your body gets ready to face the threat.
- **Flight:** your body prepares you to get away.
- **Freeze:** your body pauses, and you may feel stuck or numb while your brain quickly checks what to do next.

All these reactions are **normal** and **common**, automatic ways your body tries to keep you safe.

## TYPES OF ANXIETY

Anxiety can affect us and show up in many ways and each type has its own unique signs and characteristics.

Here are some of the most common types of anxiety:

**An anxiety attack** can build up slowly and may come with feeling worried for a long time. If you feel scared or anxious for a long period, please talk to your GP.

**A panic attack** happens suddenly and brings strong feelings of fear. During a panic attack, a person might find it hard to breathe, their heart may race, they might have chest pain, or they may feel light-headed or faint.

**Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** is the most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorder, causing frequent worry about everyday things. Support from a GP, therapy, lifestyle changes, and sometimes medication can help people manage symptoms.



There are also other anxiety disorders, such as:

- Specific Phobia
- Selective Mutism
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia)
- Panic Disorder
- Agoraphobia
- Substance/Medication-Induced Anxiety Disorder
- Anxiety Disorder Due to Another Medical Condition
- Other Specified Anxiety Disorder
- Unspecified Anxiety Disorder

(DSM-5-TR)

Remember that anxiety is incredibly common and many people can experience it. Some people can feel anxious a lot of the time, and sometimes without an obvious reason.

Whether you experience anxiety a little or a lot, it can be helpful to seek some additional guidance and support.

**You have already taken the first step on your journey by picking up this booklet.**

## MANAGING ANXIETY

This section provides tips and tools to manage and live with anxiety.

Anxiety might cause some people to use **unhelpful coping mechanisms**, like smoking, using recreational drugs, drinking more alcohol than usual or gambling. It can create a cycle of worsening anxiety, leading to dependence and making long-term recovery more difficult.

If you are concerned about this, please **contact your GP** or check the resources in the section 'Additional Support'.

**In the same way that your journey has been unique, your recovery will be too.**



## Some helpful strategies to consider

### Talking it through

Although you might feel uncomfortable, **sharing your feelings** can be helpful. Talking with someone you can trust, for example friends, family, colleagues or someone who has had a similar experience, can help you to feel supported. There are **organisations with services** that can offer support, too. For a list of these, please check the signposting and resources at page 18.



### Learning about yourself

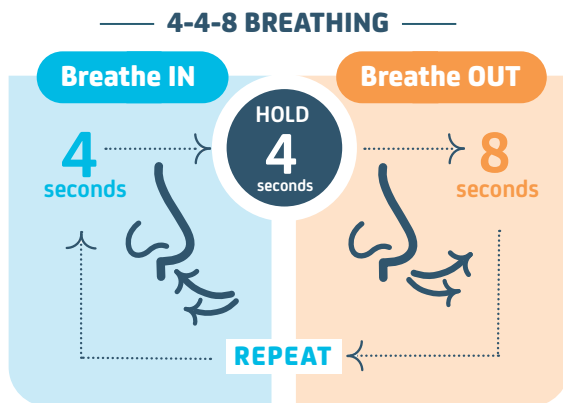
Try to learn more about your anxiety, keep a **journal** or a **diary** to note down when you experience anxiety and what happens. This can be a helpful way of recognising and understanding your anxiety. You can find a template at the end of this booklet.

## Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques can help with the mental and physical feelings of anxiety.

**Yoga, meditation** or **mindfulness** can help.

Some people may find **deep breathing exercises** helpful. The **4-4-8 Breathing** exercise encourages a deeper relaxation. This is when you inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds. Ideally, this should be repeated a few times. This becomes easier with practice.



For a demonstration of this exercise, visit:  
<https://youtu.be/9-A7zWwTWfQ>



## Healthy eating

**What we eat can affect our mood and mental wellbeing.** Our gut sends messages to our brain that help control our hormones, health and mood.

This means that the food we digest can influence how we feel day-to-day. Eating more **fruits, vegetables** and **fermented foods** can help keep your gut healthy.

**Sugary foods** can give you a quick burst of energy, but this is usually followed by a drop in blood sugar, which may increase anxiety.

**Caffeine** can also raise anxiety levels, so it can help to limit tea, coffee and caffeinated soft drinks. Drinking **water** or **juice** instead can keep you hydrated and support your overall wellbeing.



Using a tool like the **Food Pyramid** can help you have a balanced diet. Visit:  
<https://tinyurl.com/ye268ebh>

## Spending time in nature

Spending time in nature, going for a walk, sitting by water, or simply breathing in fresh air can help calm your mind and reduce anxiety. Focus on the sights, sounds, and smells around you to stay present and grounded.



## Journalling

Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help you deal with anxiety. It can make your worries **easier to understand**. You can write whatever comes to mind, list what is worrying you, or write about things you are thankful for. Doing this regularly can help you spot patterns and manage your anxiety better.

## Practicing gratitude

Practicing gratitude can help reduce anxiety by **shifting your focus** away from worries and towards the positive parts of your life. You can use a **gratitude journal** to write down a few things you appreciate each day. You might also try a **gratitude app** to record thankful thoughts or take a few minutes to breathe deeply and think about something good that happened. You can find a gratitude journal template here:

[www.mentalhealthireland.ie/  
resources-library/gratitude-journal](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/resources-library/gratitude-journal)



## Listening to music

Music can help you feel calmer and less anxious. Listen to relaxing sounds, your favourite songs, or anything that makes you feel good. Pay attention to the beat and words to stay in the moment and relax.



## Sleep

A good sleep routine is important to help manage your anxiety. **Breathing exercises**, mentioned earlier, may also help. Reducing **screen time** can be beneficial, leave your phone outside the room so you are not tempted to look at it during the night.

**Remember, a sleep routine can look different for everyone.**



## Spirituality

Spirituality can be a useful tool to support your anxiety. People can express spirituality in many different ways such as meditation, prayer, achieving peace of mind, or simply being at peace with oneself.



## Try to face your fear, with support

If you are feeling anxious because of certain fears, noticing this is the first step in dealing with it. Even though facing those fears might feel uncomfortable, avoiding them all the time can make anxiety worse. When you keep avoiding situations that worry you, you may end up missing out on things you want or need to do.

However, **do not attempt this on your own**, please get support from your GP. Family and friends may not always know how to support but speaking to your GP might help.

### Other strategies you can use....

- **The Worry Jar** is a simple tool for managing anxiety. Write each worry on a piece of paper, then place it in the jar and leave it there. This can help stop you from thinking about the same worries over and over during the day. It also allows you to set a specific 'worry time' to look at them later, instead of carrying them with you all the time.



- **Creative activities**, for example mindful colouring and doodling, painting or photography.
- **The Anxiety Worksheet** at the end of this booklet to create a list of things that may help at times when you are likely to become anxious.



By trying these tools, you can find out what helps you understand and manage your anxiety. Take your time and practice and remember that **you are the expert on yourself**.

If you need extra support, the next section has a list of **organisations** to contact. Reaching out for help can be a positive step in your journey toward managing and living with anxiety.



## ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

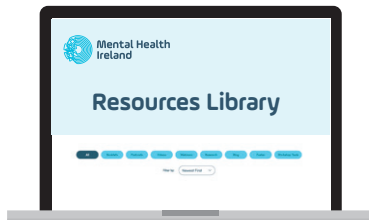
If your anxiety is making daily life difficult, it's a good idea to ask for help. It might feel hard, but reaching out is a sign of strength and can really make a difference.

### Mental Health Ireland Resources Library

Check out the Mental Health Ireland webpage for tools & support.



Scan with your mobile to bring you to the Mental Health Ireland Resources Library.



We provide community and workplace training workshops. For more information visit:  
[www.mentalhealthireland.ie/training](http://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/training)

## Local Mental Health Support

### General Practitioner (GP)

You can visit your GP, who will be able to guide you on a range of helpful options available. If you do not have a GP, you can find one in your area here: [www2.hse.ie/services/find-a-gp](http://www2.hse.ie/services/find-a-gp) or you can contact one of the websites or numbers listed in the next section.



### Mental Health Services

Mental health services can be accessed through your GP. For an understanding of what these are please check out: [www2.hse.ie/mental-health/services-support](http://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/services-support)

## Medication

Medication is sometimes prescribed to provide help. It can be most helpful when it is used in combination with other treatments or supports. **Visit your GP to find out more.**

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## In an Emergency

If in distress or out of GP office hours you can contact your **local A&E department**.

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## Support Groups

You can learn a lot about managing anxiety from asking other people who have experienced it. **Local peer support** and/or **online support groups** bring together people with similar experiences so that they can hear each other's stories, share tips and encourage each other to try out new ways to manage anxiety. Check online for support groups around you or check **yourmentalhealth.ie**.

Remember that everyone's recovery journey is unique, so it's important to find the type of support that feels right for you. Visiting your GP is a good first step to explore your options and decide what might help most.

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## Specialist Mental Health Services

Your GP may refer you to a specialist mental health service. They provide various treatments, including counselling, and other programmes. Often these different services are coordinated by a **Community Mental Health Team (CMHT)**, which is usually based either at a hospital or a local community HSE centre. You can contact your local CMHT through your local HSE office.

For more information on mental health services in Ireland check out **www.yourmentalhealth.ie**

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## Counselling & Support

Counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can be very effective for people experiencing anxiety. If cost or accessibility is a concern, MyMind offers in-person and online low-cost counselling, and provides services in a range of different languages. You can learn more at **www.mymind.org**

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**Irish Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy**  
**www.iacp.ie**

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**Irish Council for Psychotherapy**  
**www.psychotherapycouncil.ie**

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**Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy (IAHIP)**

IAHIP offers a directory of Accredited Psychotherapists, helping people find high-quality psychotherapy locally or online.  
**www.iahp.org/Psychotherapist-Directory**



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## Mental Health Support Organisations

### Samaritans

Samaritans is a free listening service. Call **116 123** or visit: **[www.samaritans.org/ireland/samaritans-ireland](http://www.samaritans.org/ireland/samaritans-ireland)**

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### Text About It by spunout

An anonymous 24/7 text support service offering mental health support. Text **HELLO** to **50808**

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### Grow

Grow is a peer support service with local groups and offices. Call **1890 474 474** or visit: **[www.grow.ie](http://www.grow.ie)**

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### Aware

Aware offers local support groups. Call **1800 804 848** or visit: **[www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)**

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### spunout navigator

Online tool connecting you to personalised mental health information, resources and support.  
**<https://spunout.ie/navigator>**



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## Finance

There is support available to help you gain control of your financial situation. **Citizens Information** and the **Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)** have information on ways to support people who are in debt.

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### CitizensInformation.ie

Check online for your local office: [www.citizensinformation.ie](http://www.citizensinformation.ie)

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### Money Advice Bureau (MABS)

Check online for your local office: [www.mabs.ie](http://www.mabs.ie)

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## Gambling

If you are having a tough time with gambling, you can reach out to the National Helpline for Problem Gambling at **1800 936 725**. You can also find more information and support at [www.Gamblingcare.ie](http://www.Gamblingcare.ie)

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## Substance Abuse Support

If you're looking for support with substance use, **including alcohol**, there are great resources that can help.

You can find helpful info, advice and services at [www.drugs.ie](http://www.drugs.ie) and [www.alcoholireland.ie](http://www.alcoholireland.ie)



## Anxiety Management Worksheet

Tracking your anxiety can help you notice patterns and better understand what causes you to feel anxious.



Scan the QR code to download an A4 version of our Anxiety Management Worksheet

or visit:  
<https://bit.ly/anxietysheet>

What's making me feel anxious?	What thoughts are going through my head?	How am I feeling physically?	What can I control in this situation?	What can I do to calm my body?

## THE FIVE WAYS TO WELLBEING

The Five Ways to Wellbeing are simple, evidence-based actions you can do everyday to feel good and function well. (NEF, 2008)

Take some time to learn about the Five Ways to Wellbeing – they can help support you with anxiety.

### CONNECT

**Connect** with people around you, friends, relatives or co-workers you haven't spoken to in a while. Try to make new connections where possible. Building and maintaining relationships can help you feel supported.

### Take Notice

Take time to look around you; notice changes in the world, the passing of seasons. Be aware of your feelings and reflect on your experiences. Be present in the here and now. This helps reduce anxiety and brings a sense of peace.

### TAKE NOTICE

### KEEP LEARNING

#### Keep Learning

Try something new; a new recipe, hobby, or language course. Take on a different responsibility in work. Set yourself a challenge you will enjoy achieving. The sense of accomplishment can boost your confidence and reduce anxiety.

### GIVE

**Give** Do one good deed every day. Smile at a passer-by. Make someone a cup of tea. Join a community group. Doing good for someone else can be beneficial for your anxiety.

### BE ACTIVE

**Be Active** Do what you can to stay active. Try a new class in the gym, walk instead of getting the bus, try gardening, dancing, or cycling. Choose something you enjoy, that suits your mobility and fitness.





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**Educating, Empowering  
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