



Stepping Forward

A Self-help Guide for Anxiety in Later Life

Anxiety in older people:

Anxiety is a normal emotion which can be experienced in a variety of situations. If you were waiting to have an operation, then it would be considered a normal reaction to feel worried. Or if you were walking alone at night and heard footsteps behind you, you might feel nervous in that moment. These feelings can be described as **anxiety**. In these situations anxiety is considered a normal reaction, and can at times help us to cope well with a difficult situation. However, some people can experience anxiety in situations where they do not perceive it as a reasonable reaction. These feelings can develop to the point that they are experienced often or even all of the time. This can then begin to impact on peoples' everyday life, they may stop doing things they used to enjoy, or avoid situations due to these anxious feelings. If you can relate to this type of anxiety then you may find it helpful reading through this booklet and trying out some of the techniques.

This leaflet can help you to understand anxiety and learn different ways of managing it. It will teach you a variety of coping strategies and techniques to help you to relax, control worries, reduce tension and manage your anxiety.

You might ask.... How common is anxiety in older people? Am I alone with this?

Anxiety problems are as common in older people as they are in younger people. Research has shown that:

- ✓ Up to 1 in 4 adults have an anxiety disorder sometime in their lifetime.
- ✓ Almost 20 per cent of people over age 65 have had an anxiety disorder in the past six months.

Am I experiencing Anxiety?

It can be difficult to recognise that we are even suffering from anxiety, as the symptoms can be mistaken as a physical illness, or 'passed off' as a habit which has formed over many years. The first step is to identify whether anxiety is a problem for you.

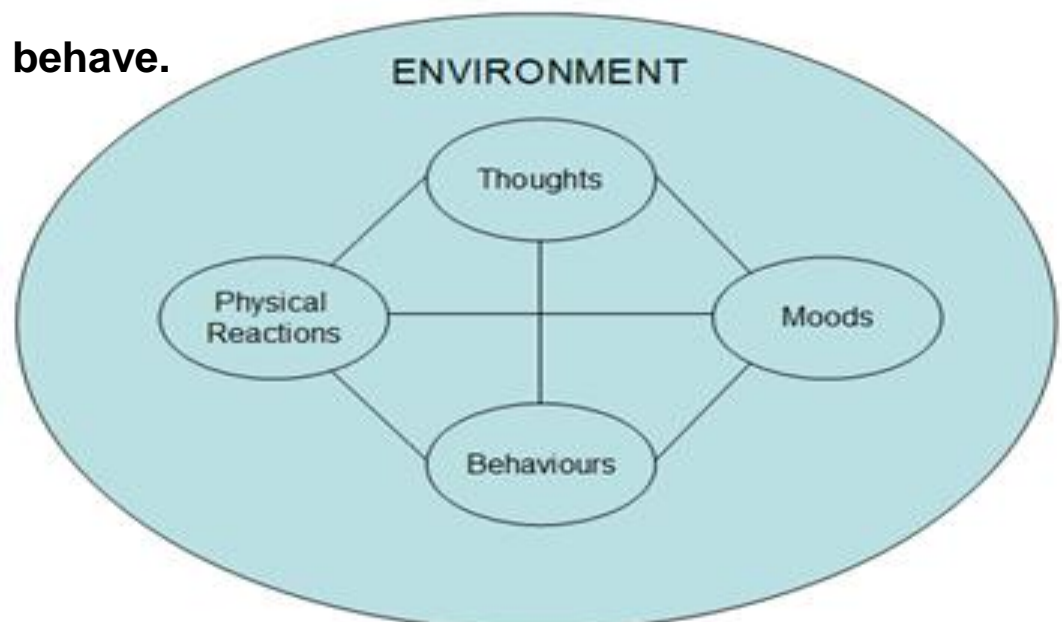
Anxiety can affect us in at least four different ways. It affects:

The way we feel.

The way we think.

The way our body works.

The way we behave.



Tick the boxes that apply:

Feelings:

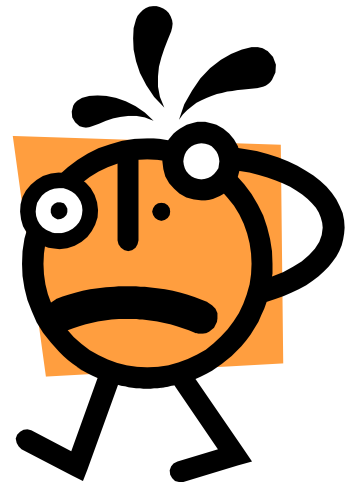
- Anxious
- Nervous
- Scared
- Worried
- Stressed

Thoughts:

- Worries
- Negative thoughts
- Thinking about the worst case scenario
- "I'm going mad"
- "I'm going to faint"
- "My legs are shaking, I might fall"
- "What if I have a heart attack"
- "I can't cope"

Body:

- Heart pounding/racing
- Tight chest
- Tingling in fingers
- Numbness
- Stomach Churning
- Feeling like you need to use the toilet
- Tension in muscles
- Aches and pains
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Dizzy
- Breathing changes



Our body's biological reaction to anxiety is also called the 'fight or flight response'. It is your body preparing you for action either to fight danger or run away from it as fast as possible. The purpose of the physical symptoms of anxiety therefore is to prepare your body to cope with threat. But as we know anxiety can also occur in situations where there is actually no threat present – and this is when anxiety starts to cause us problems.

REMINDER - These physical sensations can be uncomfortable but they are not harmful. The feelings naturally reduce over time as we begin to feel more relaxed.

If you do have any of these symptoms and have some concerns, then you should see your GP first who will monitor your physical health to rule out any health problems. If there are no problems identified by your doctor then it is likely to be anxiety.

Behaviours:

- Forgetful
- Putting things off
- Talking more or less
- Irritable
- Drinking alcohol/smoking
- Eating more or less
- Avoiding situations
- Hoarding
- Checking for safety e.g.)doors locked



IF you have ticked some of the boxes above and feel this is something affecting you at the moment then you may find it beneficial to work through this guide step by step.

What causes anxiety?

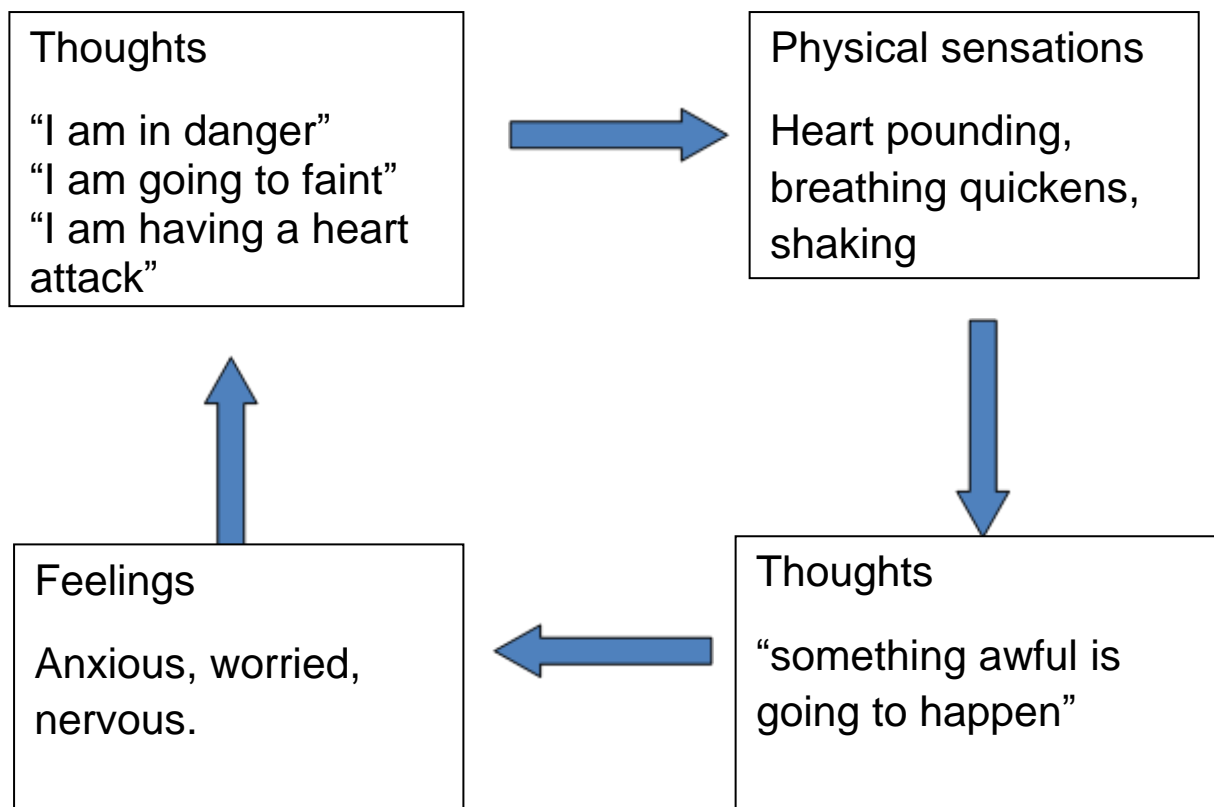
There are a variety of reasons why older people might become anxious. Some of these reasons could be a build up of stressful experiences, challenges or changes in life. Such as bereavements, financial worries, coming into retirement, physical health problems, family worries, or just that sense of feeling overwhelmed that “everything is happening all at once”.

What maintains the cycle of anxiety?

Once you have identified what symptoms you are experiencing and what may be causing your anxiety, the next step is to understand what might be keeping it going. Anxiety can be a short term problem which you have recently noticed or you may feel this is something you have experienced all of your life.

This may be because anxiety can form as a habit - some people feel they have an anxious personality and describe themselves as a worrier. If there have been a variety of ongoing problems over many years then that sense of feeling anxious or on edge can become quite normal and difficult to overcome.

Anxiety can form a vicious cycle. The physical sensations can sometimes feel as though they have ‘come out of the blue’ and can be quite frightening. Leading to thoughts that these bodily changes are an indication that something is wrong, or something bad is going to happen. This increases the level of anxiety, therefore increasing the physical symptoms.



This cycle can produce “fear of fear” – Once we have felt anxious in a certain situation, we may start to worry about feeling anxious in that same situation again, and become fearful of the actual symptoms. This as a result can actually cause the symptoms that are feared.

Fear of anxiety symptoms → Causes anxiety symptoms

This can then lead to Avoidance – because the symptoms of anxiety can be very uncomfortable, and can occur in a variety of situations. An instant reaction can sometimes be to avoid anything that makes us feel that way - including shops, buses, town, and seeing people. Avoidance can be viewed as a way of coping, but only in the short term... because in the long run it can cause more stress. The more we avoid, the harder it becomes to face these situations in the future.



Write down the symptoms you might be experiencing at the moment.

What are the physical symptoms you experience?

Example: Heart racing.

What are your thoughts about the symptoms you experience?

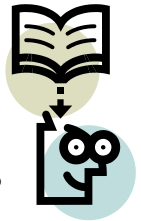
Example: "I am going to pass out"

What are you avoiding?

Example: Going to the local shop, seeing children, grandchildren, bingo.

What current stresses do you have in your life?

Example: Hospital appointments, financial problems, Health, loss.



The next steps in controlling my anxiety:

Once we have identified our symptoms of anxiety, the causes and what might be maintaining it we can then look at ways of managing it. The second section of the leaflet will look at increasing your understanding of your own anxiety, managing the physical symptoms, changing the way we think and changing what we do. We will look at making gradual changes, taking things step by step – small changes can make a big difference.

Anxiety Diary

Keeping a diary of your own anxiety can help you identify the times of the day that anxiety is worse. It can also help you to recognise the situations and activities that you are avoiding at the moment. Once you can identify the times your anxiety increases you can start to find new ways of controlling it. You can use the template on the next page as a starting point.



Anxiety and activity level diary

	Morning (What, where, when, who with?) Anxiety 0-100%	Afternoon (What, where, when, who with?) Anxiety 0-100%	Evening (What, where, when, who with?) Anxiety 0-100%
Mon		E.g., Hospital Appointment, with daughter. 80%	
Tues			E.g., Doing a crossword Puzzle. 5%
Weds		E.g., Going on the bus into town on my own. 90%	
Thur			
Fri			
Sat / Sun			

Problem solving technique

After completing the diary you may notice that you have a natural worry about a real situation that is causing you stress at the moment. You may wish to try the problem solving technique on this worry/problem.

Trying to cope with problems which are unresolved can sometimes make us feel even more stressed and may at times effect our sleep or appetite.

By taking steps to manage these problems can help:



- 1 The first step is to write down what the problem is:

E.g., All my children have left home now, my husband passed away last year, and I am anxious/worried about what the future holds.

- 2 The next step is to write down every possible solution that comes to mind, no matter how unrealistic it seems – this part of the task can really help to clear your thoughts:

- Think about how you have coped with difficulties in the past
- Consider what other people would advise, or what you would advise others to do in this situation.



E.g., Organise finances, look for support groups, bereavement counselling, think about how I coped when my dad passed away, get a dog, look into hobbies/activities, spend time with family, go for a day out.

3 Choose the best idea. If you like, you can weigh up the pro's and con's for each option and then decide:



E.g., Chosen Ideas:

-Look into hobbies/activities.

Pros – Meet new people, enjoyment, keep busy, take mind off worries

Cons – could cost money.

-Buy a dog

Pros – company

Cons – would be hard work, costly, a big commitment.

Decision – to look into hobbies/activities.

If you have come up with several good ideas, then choose one now and then you can go back and try the others later on.



4 The next step is to break things down and work out the best way of putting this idea into action. You might want to consider who can help? What obstacles might get in the way and how you can overcome these?

E.g., Ask daughter to help by searching on the internet, pick an activity, ring up to get more information, plan a time and date that fits around hospital appointments.

5 The final step is to put it into action and see if it worked. If the problem is still there, then think about:

- Going back to step 3 and choose another idea from your list?
- Ask someone for their opinion?
- Look through your ideas and see if you can combine any of them?

Relaxation

Relaxation is a great way to manage the body symptoms of anxiety and reduce tension. Relaxation may include knitting, exercises, reading, doing a puzzle/jigsaw, walking or spending time with loved ones. It can help to schedule relaxation into your daily routine.

Make a list of the activities which help you to relax:



Is there anything new you might like to try:



Deep muscle relaxation –

Use your diary to help you to identify the time of day you feel most relaxed. Find a comfy place to sit or lie down. Take a few deep, long breathes in and out ready to begin the technique.

This relaxation technique can help you to recognise the difference between tension and relaxation in the body. The idea is to work through your muscle groups from your hands to your toes. Tensing your muscles – notice this tension for a moment then release this tension and relax. This can help you to relax your body, but can also provide a distraction for your mind.

Controlled breathing

Over breathing is a common symptom of anxiety and can often cause anxious thoughts “I can’t breathe”/ “I’m going to pass out”. So controlling your breathing can help you to calm your body and mind. But remember anxiety is not harmful or dangerous in any way.

Breathe in 1 - 2 - 3 CALM → Breathe out 1 - 2 - 3 CALM →

Breathe in 1 - 2 - 3 CALM → Breathe out 1 - 2 - 3 CALM →

Continue until you recognise the anxiety reduce.

It can sometimes help to keep a record of your relaxation, to help you to identify which activity helps you to feel more relaxed. Remember practice makes perfect.

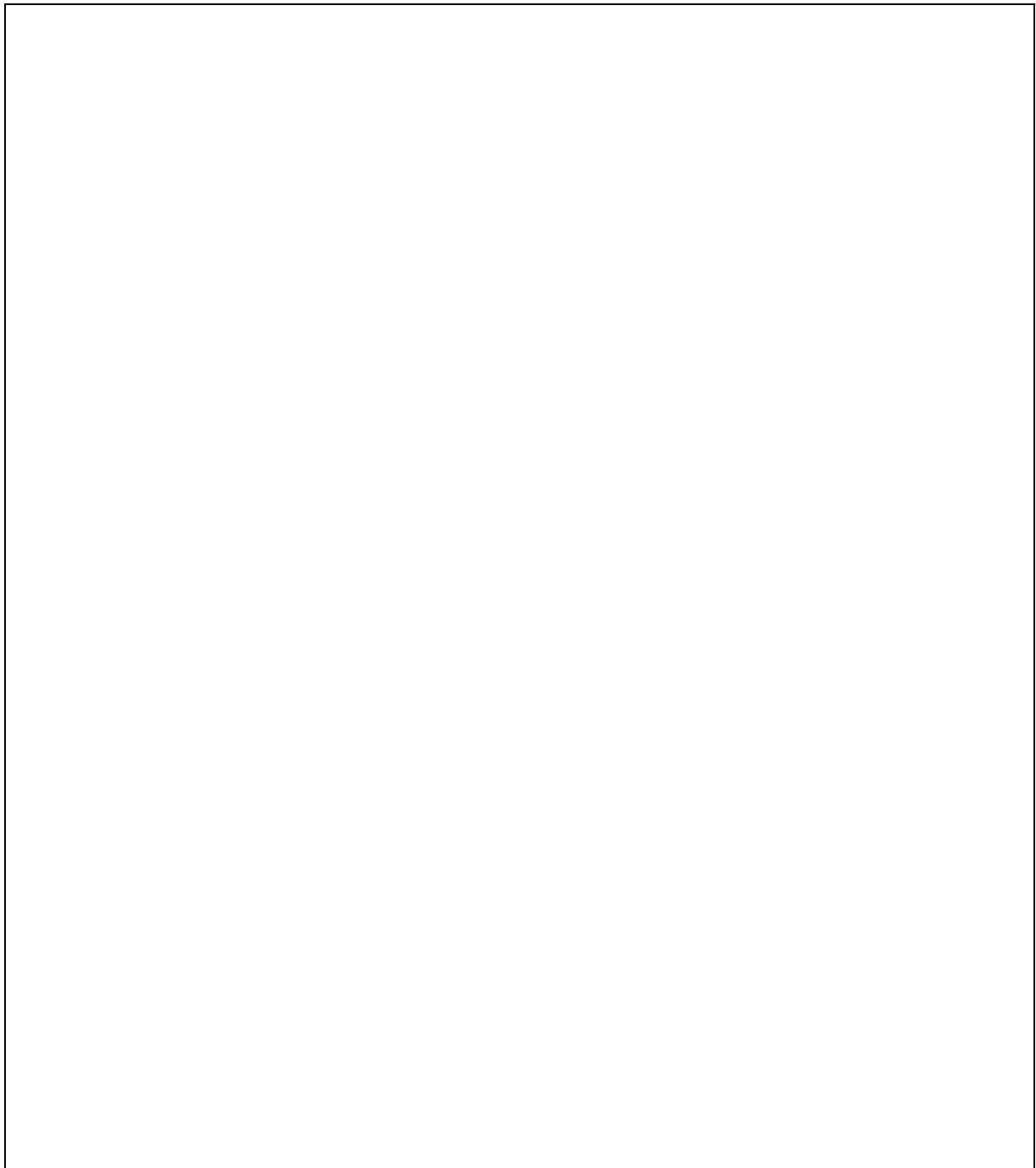
Relaxation diary

DATE & TIME & SITUATION	STRESS RATING BEFORE RELAXATION (0-100%)	STRESS RATING AFTER RELAXATION (0-100%)
Example: Mon 25 th March – just returned home from the market after collecting groceries.	80%	30%

Distraction –

Distractions can help keep you busy and take your mind off worrying thoughts and body symptoms. E.G) Housework, talking on phone, cooking a meal, doing a puzzle, reading paper, focussing on your surroundings.

Make a list of your own distraction techniques:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write a list of their own distraction techniques. The box is positioned below the instruction text and occupies most of the lower half of the page.

Changing your thoughts:

Thoughts can be words or images that enter into our mind, quite often automatically. We have a variety of thoughts and images pop into our mind throughout the day – at times of distress they can become quite negative and unhelpful.

Some of the most common unhelpful thoughts associated with anxiety are:

Catastrophising – Thinking about the worst case scenario.

“I couldn’t make it to my granddaughters birthday party because of my bad back, I am the worst grandparent ever”

“What if’s” –

E.g., “What if the anxiety gets so bad that I collapse and bang my head whilst I am out”

Predictions – thinking we know what’s going to happen in the future.

E.g., “I am going for a routine blood test next week, I know it’s going to be bad news”

Mind Reading – make assumptions about what others might be thinking.

E.g., “My family will think I am a burden because I always need help with my shopping”

Shoulds and Musts -

E.g., “I should be able to do all my housework, I must get it all done today else it won’t get done”

Write down any unhelpful thoughts that you feel might be impacting on your level of anxiety or making you feel worse.

By keeping a diary, it can help you to capture any negative thoughts or images that pop into your mind at times of stress.

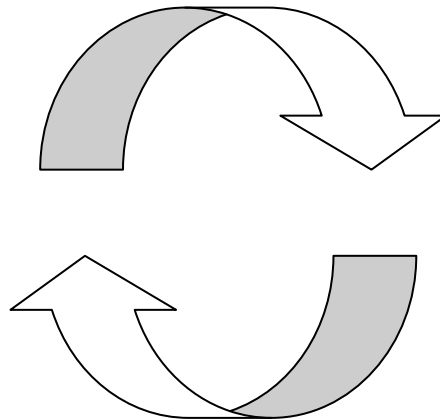
Here is an example of a diary you could complete:

Situation	Thoughts	Feelings/emotions	Behaviour
E.g., In the local shop buying groceries	“It’s too busy in here, I can’t cope, I am going to faint” “They are all looking at me, and think I’m stupid”	Anxious, worried	Left shop quickly and went home.

List down any frightening thoughts that you can think of now, that come to your mind when you’re feeling anxious:

E.g., “Here we go again” , “I feel so dizzy, what If I faint”,
“Everyone can see how red I have gone”, “I am always anxious, I hate it”

Time to reverse the vicious cycle of anxiety:



You can begin to challenge these unhelpful thoughts by asking yourself some questions to replace a negative thought with a more balance/realistic thought.

These questions may help:

Is there another way to view this?

What advice would you give your friend if they were thinking and feeling this way?

Anxious 'unhelpful' negative thought	Balanced more realistic thought
I am never going to get rid of this anxiety.	I am taking steps to control my anxiety now, by using these techniques I can start to manage it better.
I'm going crazy	Anxiety is a normal emotion. It doesn't mean I am going crazy.
I can't stop shaking there must be something awful wrong.	A symptom of anxiety is shaking. I can try the relaxation techniques to calm my body.

Worry Time

If you describe yourself as a “worrier” then Worry time can sometimes help. Firstly put aside 15 minutes in the evening as scheduled time to worry. Worries should then be postponed throughout the day until your “Worry time”.

At worry time the idea is to spend time worrying about the things that you postponed throughout the day. When you are recalling your worries – you may notice that it is difficult to bring worry on, to remember your worries, or that the worry is not as important as it first seemed. Postponing worries until “worry time” can help you to gain more control and reduce the time spent worrying.

Just chose a time in the evening E.G) 6pm – for 15 minutes. After your worry time has finished – find a distraction, do something you enjoy and stop worrying.

Say NO to avoidance... and Face your Fears



As mentioned earlier on in the booklet avoidance is one of the factors that can keep anxiety going as it only helps in the short term. More you avoid, the more difficult it becomes to face situations and you feel more anxious. Therefore it is important to take gradual steps forward in facing your fears.

Doing this gradually, and setting small goals can be helpful. Starting off with the easiest task first. You will find that anxiety often increases quite quickly but then over time it will naturally reduce. By avoiding or escaping from situations - you don't get the chance to find out for yourself that nothing bad would actually happen or that you can cope.

By facing your fears you can begin to recognise that you can cope in situations, and this helps to increase your confidence, therefore reducing your anxiety.

Further help

Working through this guide step by step and using some of the exercises in this booklet should help you to start to overcome your anxiety. Remember you are not alone...if you feel you would benefit from more support then please speak with your GP or your therapist/practitioner.

This booklet was written by Laura Hallmark with contributions from Bobbie Petford, Kira Bradbeer, Lin Bradshaw and Julie Davies.

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