

STRESSED TO KILL

Anxiety is on the rise, but there are ways to keep calm and carry on

Your heart's pounding, you can't breathe and your palms start sweating as you're about to head into that meeting. Welcome to the world of anxiety - a fidgety, twitchy place where, according to pretty shocking statistics, we're all spending a lot more time.

One in five people in the UK feel anxious all or a lot of the time, and women are far more likely to suffer from "I can't cope with this" thoughts than men.*

Reasons for our collective panicking are varied. "You may have a tendency to feel anxious, be sensitive to criticism, be a perfectionist, compare yourself constantly to others - social media has a lot to answer for here - or have an ongoing worry in your life that affects everything else," says Jo Usmar, co-author of *This Book Will Make You Calm*.

"In today's 24/7 culture, there's pressure to always make the 'right' decision and to live up to your own and society's expectations. It can feel overwhelming trying to juggle all your different day-to-day roles: friend, colleague, sister, mother, partner, daughter, etc."

And there's no denying anxiety is increasingly affecting more of us, as illustrated by the seven per cent rise in the number of hospital admissions for stress in recent years.**

But fear not - there are simple things you can do to ease anxiety and give yourself a big dose of calm when you need it most. Whether your worry manifests itself physically, behaviourally or emotionally, using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques can help soothe you.

"CBT is based on the belief that your thoughts, emotions, body and behaviour are all linked," says Jo. "It's like dominoes: if one of them is negative, the rest will follow, which means that if you change one for the better, they all improve."

Read on for our top tips on how to attack anxiety before it attacks you.

PHYSICAL: FIGHT OR FLIGHT

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

*Racing heart	*Dry mouth	*Nausea or stomach cramps
*Heavy breathing	*Paleness	*Excessive sweating
*Dilated pupils and sensitive hearing	*Cold feet or fingers	*Trembling or shaking
	*Pins and needles	*Inability to sleep
	*Dizziness	

Anxiety is a perception of threat or danger, which can trigger your inbuilt fight or flight response. And it's not just limited to physical danger, such as a car racing towards you, but psychological threats too, such as an unpaid bill. "Whenever you feel threatened, fight or flight kicks in as a survival mechanism, and your body prepares you to do one or the other," explains clinical psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd. "Your nervous system floods your body with adrenalin and cortisol, putting you in attack mode, which is great if you're staring down a tiger, but not so helpful during a job interview."



ANXIETY ATTACK PLAN

FORCE A SMILE | Fact: smiling makes you feel happier.

"The way we feel emotions isn't just restricted to our brain - there are parts of our bodies that help and reinforce the feelings we're having," explains Jessamy. "It's like a feedback loop. A study by the Association for Psychological Science in the US found that the facial changes involved in smiling have a direct effect on certain brain activities associated with happiness."

TAKE A DEEP BREATH "Deep breathing has a physiological effect on the nervous system," says Jessamy. "It activates the hypothalamus, which is connected to the pituitary gland in the brain and sends out neurohormones that inhibit stress-producing hormones. This triggers an instant relaxation response in the body."

Give this simple breathing technique a try - you can even do at your desk:

1. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest.
2. Inhale slowly through your nose and out through your mouth.
3. As you inhale, push your stomach out against your hand. Hold for 2 seconds.
4. Exhale and feel your stomach deflate. Repeat until your heart rate slows.

GO FOR A MINDFUL WALK Changing your environment can calm you down physically and mentally. Set off on a stroll and employ all your senses: what can you see, hear, feel, smell and taste? Each time panicky thoughts intrude, refocus on the outside world. Is it cold? Can you feel the rain? Can you hear birds or cars? "This is about external focus," says Jessamy. "When you become present, it helps you to focus on what's around you here and now."

HAVE A BATH Yes, really. A study by Wolverhampton University found that having a bath every day can dramatically improve feelings of wellbeing and positivity. "With the water around you, I think that gives us connotations of being in the womb, and it is very comforting," explains Dr John Harcup, chairman of Malvern Spa Association. "Even half an hour once a week in the tub will make you feel calmer," advises Jo. →

BEHAVIOURAL: A SELF-DEFEATING ATTITUDE

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- *Increased drinking, smoking or drug-taking
- *Socialising all the time to avoid being alone with your thoughts, or alternatively withdrawing and isolating yourself
- *Becoming a workaholic or avoiding work
- *Over- or under-eating
- *Snapping at people
- *Poor time management
- *Not looking after yourself
- *Becoming forgetful
- and distracted
- *Constantly seeking reassurance
- *Being reckless
- *Talking more and faster, or not saying much at all
- *Procrastinating
- *Fidgeting

"Anxiety provokes unhelpful behaviour because you're frustrated, angry or frightened," Jessamy explains. "But doing any of the things listed above will just add guilt or shame into the mix, making you feel worse. Recognising this behaviour will help you feel more in control: 'I know what I'm doing, so I can stop it.' It's totally natural to be scared of the unknown, of failure, of being wrong, of losing control, and even of success. But it can lead to avoidance, putting things off until they become a huge, seemingly insurmountable problem."

ANXIETY ATTACK PLAN

VISUALISE SUCCESS It's a technique employed by athletes and actors, and experts say that using guided visualisation can help you achieve a positive outcome.

"Picture yourself in the situation you're avoiding or scared of. Imagine the best, most confident version of yourself dealing with things calmly," advises Jo. "What is this version of you doing? What solutions have they come up with? How are they negotiating potential obstacles? Now follow your own advice! Hearing yourself describe a plan out loud can give you the confidence you need to face the issue."

Jessamy adds: "Positive visualisation gets you into a better frame of mind, as it can actually evoke the same physical response. It can help build your confidence about a situation, too."

IDENTIFY THE ROOT CAUSE OF YOUR WORRY "You may have started comfort-eating to cope with your horrible job and now view overeating as your main issue, when it's not - your job is," says Jo. "It's important to tackle the source of the problem, otherwise the symptoms won't go away. Make a list of everything you're anxious about and see if you can connect the dots - often one thing is causing the other."

ASK FOR HELP Turning to others for assistance is *not* a weakness - it's a strength. If you're struggling, you'll only dig yourself deeper by trying to manage it all yourself. Once you've sought advice, it will feel like a huge relief, and people will respect you for it. Always remember that people *like* being asked for their opinion. They'll be flattered. "Who you ask depends on the context and whether your anxiety is personal or professional.

It's more important that you don't feel like you're keeping it to yourself and feeling stuck, but instead taking action and seeking out support," says Jessamy.

'PEOPLE ARE MORE ANXIOUS NOW THAN THEY WERE FIVE YEARS AGO'[†]

'ASK YOURSELF: "CAN I DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT?" IF YES, THEN DO IT! IF NO, STOP WORRYING'

EMOTIONAL: STRESSED-OUT THINKING

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE

THINKING:

- "What if..."
- "This is all my fault"
- "Why does this always happen to me?"
- "I'm not as good as her"
- "This is going to be terrible"
- "I can't cope"
- "They're all talking about me"
- "I can't stop thinking about it"
- "I can't concentrate"

Fyi

CALMING SCENTS

Need an extra sensory shot at soothing your nerves? Try burning some ylang-ylang essential oil. "Ylang-ylang is very calming and is great for treating those with anxiety and stress. It's even been known to reduce symptoms of over-rapid breathing and palpitations," says Susan Curtis medicines director at Neal's Yard Remedies. Try Ylang-Ylang Organic Essential Oil (£9.20 for 10ml).

ANXIETY ATTACK PLAN

BANISH 'WHAT IF'S'

"The trouble with thinking about 'what ifs' is that, even if the worst does happen, you have gained nothing by spending the whole day tying yourself up in knots about it - and if it doesn't happen you've felt bad for nothing," says Jessamy. "Also, by worrying you can kick-start the fight or flight response, waste time and lose focus, and then feel guilty about that on top of everything else. Ask yourself: 'Can I do anything about it?' If yes, then do it! If no, then stop worrying."

VISIT FREEMINDFULNESS.ORG

When things get too much, this site is packed with mindfulness practices that will help you to become more aware of your thoughts, body, emotions, impulses and the world around you. "It's easy to get sucked into a swamp of panicky paranoia and thoughts. Being mindful will help you to step back and take stock," says Jo. And in no time at all, you'll be well on your way to an anxiety-free life. **F**