

ANXIETY

and how to manage it



Mental Health Foundation
mauri tū, mauri ora OF NEW ZEALAND

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a very common experience. We all get anxious or fearful from time to time in stressful situations, and that's completely normal.

As humans we are 'hardwired' to experience fear so that we can act instinctively (quickly and without thought) when we are threatened or in danger. It is our brain's way of protecting us.

But when those feelings come when there is no danger present, or when they are overwhelming or go on for a long time, you may be experiencing an anxiety disorder.

How can anxiety affect you?

The feelings associated with anxiety can range from being a bit uneasy, to a deep sense of dread, to feeling panicky and frightened. They affect both the tinana (body) and the hinengaro (mind) or our thoughts. When you are anxious, you may:

- feel wound up, restless, nervous or worried
- have a racing heart, feel tight in the chest, breathless or exhausted
- feel nauseous
- have trouble sleeping
- be unable to think clearly or concentrate
- worry a lot about money, your health, whānau/family or work, even when there are no signs of trouble
- be unable to relax, enjoy quiet time, or be by yourself
- avoid activities you previously enjoyed, like meeting friends and whānau, or travelling.

If your anxiety impacts your quality of life, or you feel unable to manage it, you should speak to a health professional. There are many different ways to access support.

Anxiety disorders

While many people report some symptoms of anxiety (one in four adults in Aotearoa, 2021–2023), an anxiety disorder is diagnosed by a specialist based on severity and specific symptoms. There are a number of diagnoses of anxiety disorders, including:

- generalised anxiety
- separation anxiety
- selective mutism
- agoraphobia
- specific phobias
- social phobia
- panic disorder

Anxiety disorders are common and treatable.

Panic attacks

A panic attack is a sudden and intense episode of anxiety. Physical symptoms like a racing heart can make people feel like they are about to die, collapse or lose control of their minds. These frightening thoughts intensify the panic.

Panic attacks are common. They are not life-threatening, even if it can feel like it.

What can you do when you experience a panic attack?

Focus on slowing down your breathing, particularly the exhale. Try the following:

- breathe in for a count of three
- hold for a count of one
- breathe out for four (pushing the air out with your stomach).

Remember these feelings and sensations will pass.

Let people in your life know what's going on for you, so they can support you in the moment.

Managing anxiety: Self-help

There are things you can do to support yourself. Look at the treatment options on the back page, and the self-care tips below. With support, your anxiety can be manageable and you can live well.

- **Breathe.** When you feel anxious, breathe slowly and deeply. Try belly breathing – place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. When you breathe in, your stomach should push out, not your ribs. Make this style of breathing a habit.
- **Talk** to friends and whānau about how you are feeling and share your thoughts with them.
- **Stay active.** Walk, cycle, run, play sports, dance, garden or do regular movement that you enjoy.
- **Relax.** Try a relaxation podcast, meditation or yoga. Go for a walk in the park.
- **Sleep** is the most important form of relaxation. Try to establish a regular sleep routine.
- **Avoid** substances that make anxiety and panic worse, such as caffeine or alcohol.
- **Connect** with cultural activities such as waiata (singing), dancing, kapa haka or crafts. Belonging and connection help with your wellbeing.

Quick tips and tricks

Try the strategies below when things get difficult.

- **Question:** How realistic is this worry?
- **Talk it out:** Share the worry with someone you trust.
- **Write it out:** Put it on paper. That puts it in perspective.
- **Shrug it off:** Raise your shoulders, and then drop them. This can help to release shoulder tension.
- **Breathe it away:** Inhale deeply and exhale with a sigh. Do this a few times. Let your tension go as you breathe.
- **Set an 'appointment with worry':** Take 15 minutes to concentrate on your worry. Then try to put it aside.
- **Work it off:** Move your body. Give your tension an outlet.
- **Distance it:** Imagine it a few years from now. How much will it matter then?
- **Balance it:** Find a good side as well as the bad.
- **Let it go:** Picture a river. Now picture placing each worry on a leaf as it floats by on the water.
- **Let it pass:** Notice how you're feeling without judgement, remind yourself it will pass and you will be okay.
- **Make it positive:** Surround yourself with happy colours and sounds. Remember your strengths.

**Relax
regularly**



Getting help

Treatments and strategies

If anxiety is impacting your daily life, reach out and seek help.

Talk to your GP or Māori hauora (health) provider.

Have a check-up to rule out any physical cause for your symptoms. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist, e.g. a psychologist, counsellor, cognitive-behavioural therapist or other mental health service.

Medication. Your GP may prescribe medication, along with other strategies for managing anxiety. Talk about what is right for you. It is very important that you don't suddenly stop taking medication without your doctor's advice.

Talking therapy can be very helpful. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helps you learn about the links between your situation, physical sensations, and your thoughts and beliefs. It teaches ways to change unhelpful thought patterns.

If you initially find therapy unhelpful, try a different form of therapy and a different therapist – it can take time to connect with someone who is right for you.

In addition, you may consider rongoā or other traditional medicines that you connect with.

Peer support. Support groups can connect you with others who have similar experiences. Many find they are a key part of keeping well. Find support group listings here: mentalhealth.org.nz/groups

**Connect
with others**



Keep learning

Learn more about anxiety, mental health and wellbeing. See websites such as **mentalhealth.org.nz**, **healthify.nz** and the 'understanding anxiety' section at **depression.org.nz**. Find book reviews at **mentalhealth.org.nz/books** or visit your local library.

Digital tools

Use free digital tools and support programmes available online. Check out **smallsteps.org.nz**, **headstrong.org.nz**, **thelowdown.co.nz**, or **justathought.co.nz**

Helplines

Talking through challenges with a trained professional can help.





- Call or text 1737 to speak to a trained counsellor, 24/7
- Anxiety Helpline: 0800 269 438 (0800 ANXIETY)
- More helplines can be found at:
mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of free mental health and wellbeing information and resources. Visit **shop.mentalhealth.org.nz**

Find us online

To find out more about our work, visit:

-  resource@mentalhealth.org.nz
-  www.mentalhealth.org.nz
-  [mhfnz](https://www.instagram.com/mhfnz)
-  [mentalhealthfoundationNZ](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ)

Disclaimer

This brochure should not be used in place of an accurate diagnosis or assessment. If you think you may have a mental health condition or would like further information or support, please talk to your GP or Māori health provider.

Help us, to help others

The Mental Health Foundation is a charity, and we rely on donations to support our work.

Visit **www.mentalhealth.org.nz** to find out more.

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