Anxiety and problem solving

Anxiety is very common in ADHD, because it is difficult to relax with a restless body and racing thoughts. At night, worry may keep you awake.

What physical sensations do you experience when you are stressed or anxious?

Mind Racing?

Possible sleep disturbance?

Dizzy, Disorientated, lightheaded?

Vision strange, blurry?

Feeling breathless, breathing fast & shallow?

Difficulty in swallowing?

Heart racing, palpitations?

Nausea/ lack of appetite?

Trembling

Sweating or shivering?

Restless?

Jelly-like legs?

Wanting to run?

Have you ever experienced anxiety and you were not sure why? Sometimes it is clear why you are anxious, such as before attending a job interview, but other times it is harder to pinpoint. At such times, those physical symptoms can seem frightening. Understanding these symptoms can help to diffuse this fear.
The evolved brain

Anxiety is part of the **Fight-Flight-Freeze-Submit response**, which evolved to protect us from danger. Noticing and acting upon threat is crucial to survival. Our threat system is based in the limbic system, a primitive, animal part of our brain, which is highly sensitive and developed.

### The threat system

- Can override our ‘rational brain’ (the frontal cortex), resulting in irrational responses to situations.
- Can be activated by our imagination. An imagined threat (“I’m going to lose my job”) will generate the same feelings as if this scenario actually happened.
- Prioritises the negatives. Our brain is biased to look for threat. This is why we are more likely to recall negative experiences than positive ones.
- Is sensitive to social threats. Humans developed as social animals who work together, so acceptance by others has always been necessary for survival.
- Is affected by our past experiences, therefore our threat system will be triggered by situations that have been negative in the past. If our upbringing is supportive and helpful, we can learn to soothe the threat response; if not, it can be hyper-sensitive and triggered too easily.

In modern life, we are rarely at risk of imminent death, but our brains continue to follow these well-developed patterns in the form of anxiety.
There are four components to anxiety

1. THOUGHTS
   - There must be something really wrong with me.
   - That was too scary!
   - What if panic when I’m out!
   - I wouldn’t be able to cope!

2. PHYSICAL SENSATIONS
   - Sense of dread
   - Choking
   - Rapid heart beat
   - Wobbly legs
   - Shaky
   - Feel faint

3. EMOTIONS
   - This is never going to go away!
   - I can’t beat it!
   - I’ll never win!
   - It’s always going to be like this!

4. BEHAVIOR
   - Escape
   - Avoidance
   - Running away
   - Hiding

... which all interact with each other. Think about how your behaviour changes when you have anxious thoughts, emotions and physical sensations. You may avoid situations, which only makes things worse. In the worst cases, people can develop problems like phobias, social issues or health anxiety.

Thoughts in anxiety
When we are anxious, we imagine all the things that could go wrong. We perceive ourselves as incapable of dealing with whatever we imagine. This can take the form of worry, which is as effective as sitting on a rocking horse – it never gets you anywhere.
Here are some examples of how anxiety can be experienced:

I don’t think I am worried about any one thing in particular, but I often lay in bed at night and all the things that have happened that day rush through my head . . .

I have a constant ‘chatter of worries inside my head. I think about my upcoming exams, I know I won’t manage to revise on time . . .

Anxiety-provoking beliefs
The basic, core beliefs we have about ourselves can often be a major source of anxiety. For example, if you think “I am stupid,” you can rarely relax for fear of getting things wrong.

Sometimes the rules for living that arise out of our beliefs are unhelpful and cause stress. For example, the person who believes “I am stupid” may have an unwritten rule of “I should not tell other people my ideas,” which may undermine their ability to contribute at work.

Managing stress

Stress prevention strategies

- Don’t take too much on, learn assertiveness techniques to help you say no
- Get some kind of structure and good habits into your life
- Make sure you make time for friendship and fun
- Accept yourself for who you are, good points and bad points, or at least try not to be so hard on yourself
• Remember that stress is not bad for you; anxiety symptoms are your body’s way of preparing you to meet a challenge
• Focus on the parts of a situation that you can control or influence, not those you can’t
• Smile and breathe! Learn a technique to help you to relax

What helps you when you are anxious?

Reducing physical tension

Relaxation exercises
One of the best ways to reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety is to try relaxation exercises. Some people with ADHD find relaxation very difficult, and you may need to try different techniques or practice them several times. Alternatively, other people get on better with physical exercise to release muscle tension.

Coping with anxious thoughts

Distraction – taking your mind off things (a short-term solution)
You can use a variety of distraction techniques: doing crosswords, singing, concentrating on details around you, doing a physical activity (even if it’s just the washing up!), reading or just talking to someone to distract yourself from negative internal thoughts.

Distraction methods can be very helpful, but they should be used for short periods only as they can be a form of mental avoidance, which can make things harder in the long run.

Positive self-talk
Sometimes we find ourselves saying really unhelpful things to ourselves:

I’m going to have to try to get out of this one
I’m rubbish at this!
I’ll never be able to do it

We would never talk in this way to someone else who was trying to do something difficult!

Positive self-talk is a strategy to help you stop this by putting better thoughts in their place or “talking yourself up”. Imagine what a helpful friend would say to encourage you and how they would say it – softly and kindly.
If you know that you are going into a difficult situation, prepare yourself with positive self-talk . . .

In the situation, continue to encourage yourself:

Praise yourself afterwards: “I did well!”

**Thought challenging**

Challenge your negative thinking. How can you do this?

1. **Take notice of your thoughts.** You need to be aware of what you are thinking in order to question it. It can be helpful to write the thoughts down.

2. **Challenge your thoughts.** When we are under stress, our thinking can become distorted. Is this thought exaggerated? Try to put the thought into perspective.

3. **Replace negative thoughts** with balanced, realistic ones. After you have challenged your thoughts, re-write them in a more positive manner.

4. **Challenge your thoughts** using questions like:
   - What is the evidence for these thoughts?
   - What would someone else think about this?
   - What is the worst possible outcome? How bad would it really be?

**For example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Thought</th>
<th>Challenged Thought</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Everybody is irritated that I’m always late.”</td>
<td>“No-one has ever said anything, and I am not late every time. Most people are late sometimes and they understand how bad the traffic can be.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My boss will be furious I haven’t got this done on time.”</td>
<td>“It’s more important that it’s right than done on time. He’s never got cross before and I did tell him it might take another day or two.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anxiety-provoking beliefs . . .

. . . can be very difficult to change – you may have held these beliefs most of your life, and they are resistant to change. They are felt very strongly, and logic may only go so far, but it is a good starting point. The first step is to try to articulate what they are. Then you can begin to challenge them in the same way: *What is the evidence for the beliefs? Are they really true? What do other people say?*

Often they are extreme beliefs, such as “I am useless.” Of course, no one is completely useless; break it down and make it more moderate and reasoned. This means acknowledging your strengths as well as your weaknesses.

Rewriting the rules for living

“Because I am useless I have to work very hard at whatever I do to prove that I am not.”

“I am not useless. I will do my best at the things I have to do, but will not exhaust myself because my worth does not depend on achieving them.”

“Because I can never finish things I should not start anything but must rely on others to do things for me.”

“I can finish things for myself if I break them down and reward myself for each part. My wife can help and encourage me but I am not dependent on her.”

We all have some unhelpful beliefs and rules, and we cannot change them overnight. At the very least, you can try to be aware of your beliefs and rules and not take them so seriously, or see them in a more balanced way. “There I go again, thinking I am useless.”
Problem solving

Turn worry into constructive problem solving using the following worry flowchart. Ask yourself:

- What am I worrying about?
- Is there anything I can do about this?
  - No: Accept the situation and distract yourself if necessary
  - Yes: Work out what you could do
    - Is there anything I can do right now?
      - Yes I could do X: Do it now
      - No: Plan what you could do and…
        - Accept the situation and distract yourself if necessary


People with ADHD can have difficulties solving problems because they have trouble keeping the whole picture in mind, may forget some important factors, lack self-confidence or react impulsively.

Working out what you could do

The five stages of problem solving

1. Identify and define clearly what the problem is
2. Brainstorm possible options
3. Decide which options are realistic and unrealistic (costs and gains)
4. Choose the option that seems most feasible and helpful
5. Prepare and plan how to do it

Then try it out and review how well it went!

One of the most helpful methods in solving problems, and one which is often overlooked, is simply reviewing the previous solutions you have applied to similar problems in the past.