

# Managing anxiety during the pandemic



It is a frightening time, the surging pandemic, overwhelming negative news and the constant uncertainty of the current world has us wondering “When will this end?” and “Are we going to be ok?” We don’t know the answer to these questions yet and can’t predict what will happen next, this makes it easy to think that the worst will happen and spiral out into anxiety and panic.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling that is a completely normal and natural emotional response of our threat system to anything that is a potential danger to us (whether that threat is a real thing in front of us, or an image or thought in our mind). We all feel anxious sometimes and much of the time it is helpful. But sometimes people find they get stuck in feeling excessively or constantly anxious and worrying a great deal which gets in the way of living life as fully as they want to.

## What causes anxiety?

Anxiety can be caused by a combination of different factors including an individual’s genes, the influences of their early life experience, the stressful events going on for them right now (like the COVID-19 pandemic) and their ways of coping. The triggers for anxiety can be different for different people but they are often preceded by a stressful or traumatic life event (e.g. bullying, academic failure, assault or abuse, lockdown).

## What are some symptoms of anxiety?

When someone is anxious their thinking pattern becomes dominated by frightening or worrying thoughts about themselves, their future and the world around them. These thoughts naturally make them feel anxious, panicky and stressed and have a physical impact on the body, making people feel tense, having increased heart rate and breathing, sweating, feeling hot and cold and shaking. These are natural, automatic physical responses of our threat system, preparing the body for ‘fight or flight’.

All these difficult thoughts, feelings and sensations in the body push the person towards three types of responses, which are:

### 1. Avoidance

This includes complete avoidance such as not going out or not doing certain activities which are anxiety-provoking to smaller-scale acts of avoidance like not speaking as much in social situations or changing the subject if people ask about something you find worrying



## 2. Safety behaviours

These are things a person might do that make them feel safe in the moment, but might not actually ensure safety for example seeking reassurance from other people, needing to have certain things with you to feel safe or repeatedly checking or cleaning things

## 3. Worry and overthinking

The mind gets pulled into trying to predict threats and rehearses future scenarios, or reruns dissect and analyses events that have happened in the past, or might simply ask endless 'what if....?' or 'why....?' questions that often have no answers.

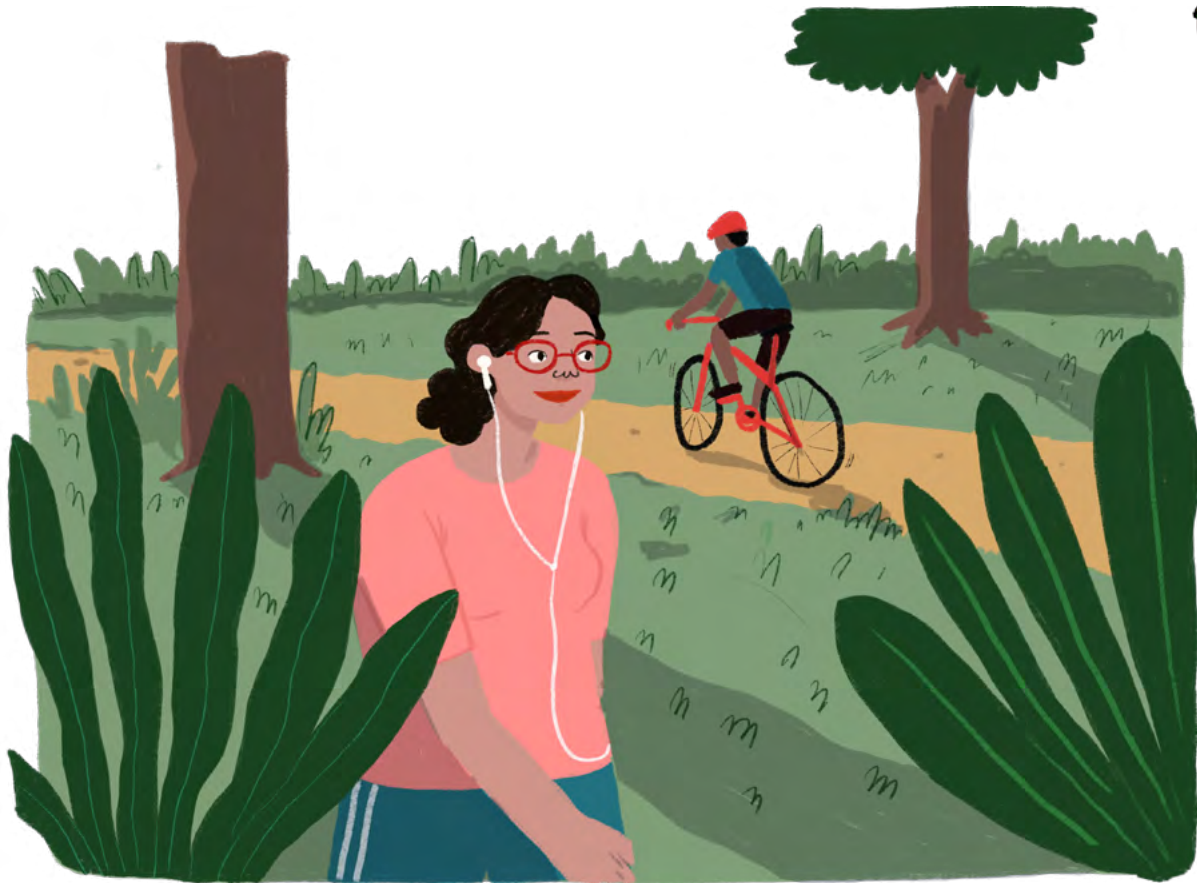
Although all of these responses are natural reactions to anxiety, the tricky thing is that the more a person behaves in these ways the more it confirms in their minds that the things they are worried about are real threats that must be avoided, and so, actually magnifies and strengthens the anxious thoughts and feelings. In this way, people get trapped in a vicious cycle of anxiety.

## What can I do to cope with my anxiety?

There are a range of things you can do to help deal with anxiety, all of them work to tackle the vicious cycle by acting in the opposite direction to the way the negative thoughts and feelings of anxiety push you.

### 1. Stay informed but don't obsess

While we need to stay informed about the current situation, there is a lot of misinformation going around, therefore it's important to be careful about the news you consume. Make sure the information you get is from trustworthy sources (like the WHO), limit the amount of time you check for news updates, step away from the news if needed and ask someone you trust to share any important updates.



## 2. Focus on what you can control

In this time of massive upheaval, it is very easy for us to feel overwhelmed by the things outside our control, but focusing on things that we have no personal control over will lead only to emotional drain and anxiety. For example, if safety is a concern, focus on safety practices to keep yourself safe (Washing hands or using hand sanitiser, avoiding non-essential shopping etc.) rather than the severity of the outbreak. If you have concerns about sudden lockdowns or work from home or self-quarantine, it is important to be proactive and prepared (list of grocery shops that home deliver, a stable internet connection etc.) as this will help relieve some of the anxiety surrounding these uncertainties.

## 3. Practice self-care

When anxious it is easy for us to forget to take care of ourselves. We need to look after both our physical health and our mental health. Check out our resources on self-care and stress to get more techniques that can help.

## 4. Help others

Helping others not only makes a difference to the beneficiaries but also to your mental health and well-being. Being kind and helpful can help regain a sense of control over your life and all meaning and purpose to it. There are many ways one can help others in the current situation like reaching out to others who are in isolation or who need support, donating to food banks or volunteer support groups etc.

## 5. Get professional support

Anxiety is treatable, and there are a number of talking therapies as well as some medications that have proven effective for different anxiety disorders. Discussing your options with a mental health professional can help you decide what treatment you feel will work best for you. To find out more about service providers and platforms visit our website.

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