

Understanding Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety is the body's alarm system. When we sense danger, our body gets ready to fight, run, or freeze. Your heart beats faster, you breathe quicker and your muscles tense.
- This is normal and healthy. Everyone feels anxious sometimes, for example before a test, a job interview or a hard conversation.
- Anxiety can even be helpful. It can help us prepare, stay safe and take things seriously.
- Anxiety problems usually come from a mix of things, like genes, stress and past experiences.
- Anxiety is not a weakness, and it is not your fault.

When Does Anxiety Become a Problem?

Everyday Anxiety

- Fits the situation
- Comes and goes
- Settles once the situation passes
- You still do the things you need to do
- Uncomfortable, but you manage

An Anxiety Disorder

- Is much stronger than the situation needs
- Hangs around for a long time, often months
- Keeps going even when nothing is wrong
- You start to avoid things, people or places
- Gets in the way of school, work, friends, or family

Common Types of Anxiety Disorders

- Generalised anxiety: worrying a lot, about lots of different things, most days.
- Social anxiety: a strong fear of being judged or embarrassed around other people.
- Panic disorder: sudden waves of intense fear (panic attacks), and worrying about having another one.
- Phobias: a strong fear of one thing, like needles, heights, dogs or vomiting.
- Separation anxiety: strong worry about being away from people you are close to.

Common Signs

- In your body: racing heart, fast breathing, sweating, shaking, an upset tummy, tight muscles, feeling dizzy.
- In your thoughts: lots of "what if...?" thoughts, expecting the worst, finding it hard to concentrate, your mind going blank.
- In what you do: avoiding things, leaving situations early, asking for reassurance again and again, over-preparing or checking.
- Other signs: trouble sleeping, feeling restless or on edge, feeling cranky, feeling tired.



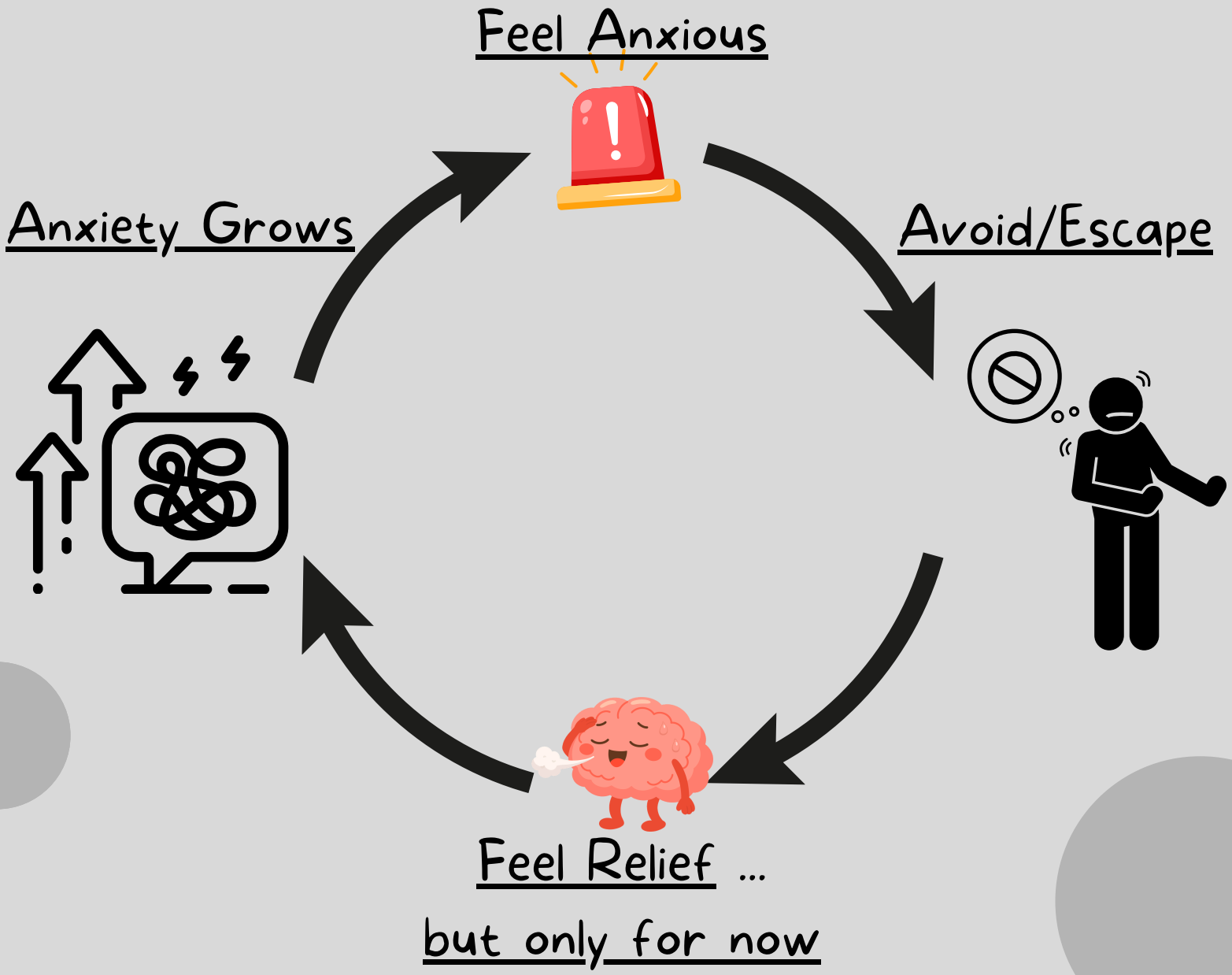
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About Panic Attacks

- A panic attack feels very scary, but it is the body's alarm going off when there is no real danger. It builds quickly and then passes, usually within minutes.
- If you have chest pain or new physical symptoms, see a doctor to get checked.

What Keeps It Going: The Avoidance Cycle

- When something makes us anxious, we often avoid it or escape it. We feel relief straight away.
- But avoiding teaches our brain that the thing really was dangerous. Next time, the anxiety is even stronger, and our world can get smaller.
- The good news is that facing fears in small, planned steps teaches the brain that we are safe and can cope. Over time, the anxiety gets smaller.





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What Helps

- Talking therapy. CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) is the best-researched treatment for anxiety, for both adults and young people. It helps you change worried thinking and face fears step by step.
- Moving your body. Regular exercise helps lower anxiety. Harder exercise helps more, but any movement counts.
- Sleep. Better sleep leads to less anxiety. Your psychologist can help with sleep.
- Reducing caffeine. Large amounts of caffeine (coffee, energy drinks) can bring on anxiety and panic. Try cutting back.
- Slow breathing. Slow breathing may help you feel a bit calmer. It works best alongside facing fears, not instead of it.
- Medicine.
  - For adults, some antidepressant medicines can help anxiety. Adding talking therapy to medicine works better than medicine alone.
  - For young people, talking therapy is usually tried first. Some medicines can help too, with close check-ups.
  - Some "calming" medicines can be habit-forming, so they are usually not the first choice.
  - Talk to your GP about medicine. Don't start or stop medicine without talking to your doctor.

Small Steps to Try This Week

- Pick one small thing you have been avoiding, and try it.
- When a "what if...?" thought shows up, ask: "What is most likely to happen? How would I cope?"
- Let anxious feelings rise and settle without running away.
- Get outside and move your body for 10–20 minutes.
- Swap one coffee or energy drink for water.
- Keep regular times for going to bed and getting up.

If Anxiety Feels Like Too Much

- Tell someone: your psychologist, your GP, or a trusted adult or friend.
- If you ever have thoughts of suicide or hurting yourself, tell someone straight away.
- Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 (24/7)
- Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24/7)
- Kids Helpline (ages 5–25): 1800 55 1800 (24/7)
- 13YARN (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support): 13 92 76
- In an emergency, call 000.

This sheet gives general information and doesn't replace advice from your health professional. Reviewed Oct 2026.