

Anxiety and Long COVID

Information for patients and carers

Sussex Community
NHS Foundation Trust

East Sussex Healthcare
NHS Trust



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is an important mechanism to protect us from danger and aid our survival. But it can sometimes become overactive, to the extent that it is not helpful.

Symptoms can include:

- racing heart
- dry mouth
- breathing fast
- stomach aches or nausea
- upsetting thoughts telling you that you cannot cope or will never get better
- trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep
- feeling irritable
- being unable to concentrate during the day
- avoiding situations, thoughts and images, for example those that remind you of being ill

Many people experience anxiety after stressful life events. Even if you previously had occasional mild anxiety, since becoming ill with COVID-19 your anxiety may have got much worse. Or you may be experiencing significant anxiety for the first time in your life.

There are different types of anxiety. It could be a general, free floating anxiety or perhaps about something specific, such as your finances. Or it could be about going out and socialising, because of worries about being re-infected with COVID-19 and getting ill again. This could lead to becoming too focused on cleanliness, handwashing and hygiene.

Some people may have been at home for so long that it feels strange to be going out doing normal things and mixing with other people again. You may find yourself worrying a lot about your health and any new symptoms.

Some people experience trauma as a result of being ill, particularly if they were in hospital and required treatment in intensive care. You might experience flashbacks or have bad memories or nightmares about being unwell and the experiences you had.

It is important to recognise that you have experienced a challenge to your health and wellbeing from a new disease, during a global pandemic. It is understandable to have some anxiety as a result, and as time passes your anxiety is likely to reduce. In the meantime there are lots of things you can do to help yourself feel better.

Top tips for coping with anxiety

Understand your anxiety

When you feel particularly anxious, make a note. It can help you try to identify what is triggering your anxiety, and can help you understand when you need to take action to manage it.

Problem solving

Try to think about what is bothering you and the practical things you could do to address this. You could list them on a piece of paper. It might help to do this with a friend or family member. This may help you to feel less overwhelmed and you might think of some easy practical steps to take that can reduce your anxiety.

Time for worry

Set aside a period of time when you allow yourself to worry, so that the rest of the time you can get on with your day. If you can, try to identify what your concerns are and try some practical problem solving during your worry time.

Distraction

Focus your mind elsewhere, perhaps by looking at your environment and thinking about what you can see, what you can smell, what you can feel and what you can touch. Or distract yourself with an activity that keeps you occupied, such as practical tasks around the home, a hobby you enjoy, doing some gardening or phoning a friend.

Relaxation

You can practice relaxation in a number of ways. You could focus on your breathing, taking deep slow breaths in through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. If deep breathing is difficult or painful, you can try a visualisation exercise where you think of a pleasant memory or experience. Close your eyes and try to imagine it in as much detail as you can, through all of your senses. Some people find physical activities helpful such as gentle yoga, stretching or going for a walk. Or having a warm bath, or a massage to aid relaxation.



Mindfulness

This is slightly different to relaxation. Mindfulness is a technique that helps you connect with the present moment through all of your senses, observing your bodily sensations, your environment and your thoughts without getting caught up in them and without any judgement. It can help you to become more self-aware, feel calmer and can help you to cope with upsetting or unhelpful thoughts. There are a number of apps and guides for mindfulness exercises that you can try (see the 'Further self help' section).

Getting support from others

It can be helpful to share how you are feeling with a friend or family member. They might be able to offer advice, reassurance or just listen to you. Talking to someone else can help to lessen your anxiety, as it can help to put things in perspective.

Further self help

Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust has a wide range of detailed self-help guides on coping with different types of anxiety, such as general anxiety, health anxiety, panic, post-traumatic stress, social anxiety and stress.

The guides are available in different formats including easy read, audio and British Sign Language videos. You can find them at web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp

The Your COVID Recovery website - www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk - also has useful information on looking after your mental health while recovering from COVID-19.

The NHS approved apps list has lots of useful resources, such as Headspace and Finding Peace in a Frantic World. Chill Panda and Worry Tree specifically deal with worry.

Visit nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health

Getting more support

If your anxiety is not improving and is starting to affect your daily life, it might be helpful to get further support. You can access confidential, psychological support from local NHS services that can provide a range of different treatments, including talking therapies.

You can ask your GP or health professional to refer you, or you can refer yourself by filling in a self-referral form on the organisation's website.

Brighton and Hove

Brighton and Hove Wellbeing Service

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Call 0300 002 0060

Self refer at www.brightonandhovewellbeing.org

West Sussex

Time to Talk Health

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Answerphone facility after 5pm and at weekends

Call 01273 666480

Self-refer at www.sussexcommunity.nhs.uk/ttth

Time to Talk Health is staffed by professionals with specialist training in supporting people with various health conditions, including Long COVID.

East Sussex

Health in Mind Long-term Conditions

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Call 0300 00 30130

Self-refer at www.healthinmind.org.uk

Anyone diagnosed with Long COVID can contact the Health in Mind Team and ask for a referral form or go to the website and fill out the self referral form. Alternatively your healthcare professional can do this with you.

Please note these are not crisis services.

If you are feeling suicidal or at crisis point

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts or need crisis support, help is available:

- Contact your GP and explain that you require urgent support
- Call the Sussex Mental Healthline on 0800 0309 500, 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Visit www.preventingsuicideinsussex.org for help and advice
- Call the Samaritans on 116 123, 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Text SHOUT to 85258 to the Shout Crisis Text Line, 24 hours a day, seven days a week

Contact us

Brighton and Hove and West Sussex



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www.sussexcommunity.nhs.uk

East Sussex



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www.esht.nhs.uk

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Our patient advice and liaison service (PALS) can help patients, families and carers with questions, comments or concerns about NHS services.

If you need advice about our services, facilities or staff, or would like to make a comment, please contact PALS at:



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