

Understanding & Working with Anxiety

A practical worksheet for awareness, relief, and confidence

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is your body's built-in alarm system. It's designed to protect you by alerting you to danger or uncertainty. Everyone feels anxiety sometimes, and that's normal.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it:

- Shows up too often
- Feels overwhelming
- Starts controlling your choices
- Interferes with your sleep, work, relationships, or joy

IMPORTANT REMINDER: Anxiety is uncomfortable and can be scary at times, but it is not dangerous. And it is workable.

Common Signs of Anxiety

You might notice anxiety in your thoughts, body, or emotions.

Mental Signs	Physical Signs	Emotional Signs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant worrying or "what if" thoughts • Trouble focusing • Overthinking or worst-case scenarios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racing heart • Tight muscles or a clenched jaw • Upset stomach or nausea • Shallow breathing • Trouble sleeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervousness or dread • Irritability • Feeling on edge • Less enjoyment in things you usually like

CHECK-IN: Which signs show up most for you?

Different Ways Anxiety Can Show Up

- **Generalized Anxiety:** Ongoing worry about many areas of life (work, health, relationships, money).
- **Phobias:** Intense fear of specific things or situations (like flying or needles).
- **Panic:** Sudden waves of intense fear with strong physical symptoms (shortness of breath, chest tightness, dizziness).

You don't need a label for your experience to be valid, but having the language to talk about it is empowering.

The Anxiety–Avoidance Loop (Why Anxiety Grows)

Anxiety often sticks around because of avoidance, even when avoidance feels helpful at first. Here's how the loop works:

- ① **Anxiety:** A situation triggers fear, thoughts, and body reactions
- ② **Avoidance:** You escape, delay, numb, or distract
- ③ **Relief:** Anxiety goes down temporarily
- ④ **Intensification:** Anxiety comes back stronger next time

Avoidance teaches your brain: "That situation is dangerous."
Facing anxiety, gently and gradually, teaches: "I can handle this."

REFLECT: What do you tend to avoid when you're anxious?

Safety Behaviors (Hidden Avoidance)

Safety behaviors are subtle ways we try to protect ourselves from anxiety, but they often keep it going. **Examples:**

- Avoiding eye contact
- Staying quiet or talking too much
- Using your phone to look busy
- Over-preparing what to say
- Leaving events early
- Using substances to feel less anxious

Short-term benefit: Relief | **Long-term cost:** Anxiety stays in control

CIRCLE OR WRITE: Which safety behaviors do you use most?

Skills to Calm Anxiety in the Moment

A **Slow Breathing** (Grounds the Nervous System)

Try this for 3–5 minutes:

- Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds
- Pause for 4 seconds
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds

Slow breathing tells your body: “I’m safe.”

B **Muscle Relaxation** (Releases Stored Tension)

Tense each area for 5–10 seconds, then release:

- Feet → legs → stomach → shoulders → arms → hands → face → whole body

Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

C **Calm Imagery** (Using the Mind to Soothe the Body)

Picture a place where you feel at ease.

- What do you see?
- What do you feel on your skin?
- What sounds are there?
- What smells or tastes are present?

Stay with this image for a few minutes.

Working with Anxious Thoughts (Not Fighting Them)

Anxiety often comes with thoughts that feel true, but aren’t fully accurate.

PICK ONE ANXIOUS THOUGHT:

REWRITE THE THOUGHT IN A MORE BALANCED WAY:

Balanced doesn’t mean overly positive; it means *more accurate*.

Ask yourself:

- Is this based on facts or feelings?
- What evidence supports this thought?
- What evidence goes against it?
- What’s the most likely outcome?
- How would someone who cares about me see this?
- Will this matter in a week or a year?

Getting Curious About Your Anxiety

Answer what feels helpful. There are no right answers

- How does anxiety show up in your body and mind?
- What situations tend to trigger it?
- What do you usually worry about most?
- What does your anxiety reveal about what you care about?
- What healthy coping strategies help you?
- What unhelpful ones sneak in when you're overwhelmed?

Shifting Your Relationship with Anxiety

Anxiety isn't the enemy; it's information.

- **Instead of:** "I need to get rid of this."
Try: "What is my anxiety trying to protect me from?"
- **Instead of:** "Something is wrong with me."
Try: "My nervous system is doing its job, just a bit too loudly."

Support That Helps Anxiety Long-Term

- **Therapy:** Helps you understand patterns, face fears safely, and build confidence.
- **Daily habits:** Sleep, movement, nutrition, and boundaries matter more than perfection.
- **Medication:** Can help reduce symptoms for some people, often most effective alongside therapy.

You don't have to do this alone. Support is not a weakness; it's a strategy.

Anxiety doesn't mean you're broken.

It means you're human, aware, and wired to survive.

With the right tools and support, anxiety can become something you work with, not something that runs your life.

Small steps count. Consistency matters.

And relief is possible.