



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Anxiety

Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. For example, sitting an exam, or having a medical test or job interview can make people feel worried or anxious. These feelings are perfectly normal.

Some people find it hard to control their worries. Their feelings of anxiety are more constant and can often affect their daily lives. This is often known as anxiety disorder and is a more serious clinical condition.

Anxiety is commonly described as generalised or social:

Generalised: a long-term condition that causes people to feel anxious about a wide range of situations and issues, rather than one specific event. People with generalised anxiety feel anxious most days and often struggle to remember the last time they felt relaxed. As soon as one anxious thought is resolved, another may appear about a different issue.

or

Social: a long-term and overwhelming fear of social situations that usually starts during the teenage years. Social anxiety is more than shyness. It's a fear that does not go away and affects everyday activities, self-confidence, relationships and work or school life. Most people occasionally worry about social situations, but someone with social anxiety feels overly worried before, during and after them.

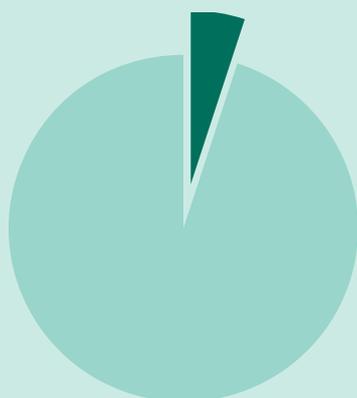
Anxiety is the body's normal reaction to perceived danger or important events: like an internal alarm system. It alerts us to danger and helps our body prepare to deal with it.

Anxiety triggers something called the "fight-flight-freeze" response. This automatic response affects thoughts, body, and behaviours. When faced with a potential threat, our thoughts focus on the danger, the body revs up to help protect you, and you take action (fight, flight, or freeze).

Although anxiety protects us in the face of real danger, it can become a problem when it goes off when there is no **real** or immediate danger; if it happens a lot, it feels intense, it is upsetting or stops you from doing fun and important things.

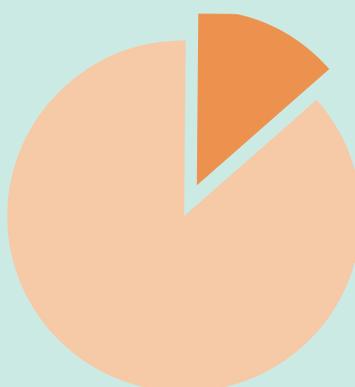
How common is anxiety?

Anxiety disorders are the most commonly diagnosed mental health condition.



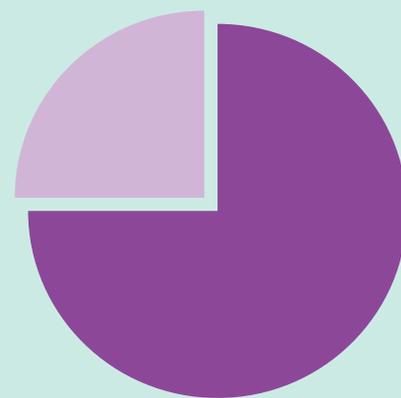
5%

Generalised anxiety is estimated to affect up to 5% of the UK population



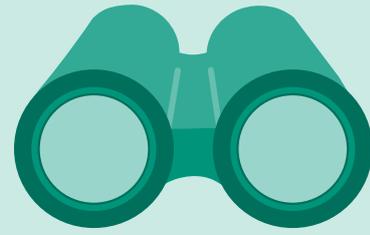
12%

Social anxiety is estimated to affect up to 12% of the population



75%

75% of people first experience symptoms of social anxiety in their teenage years

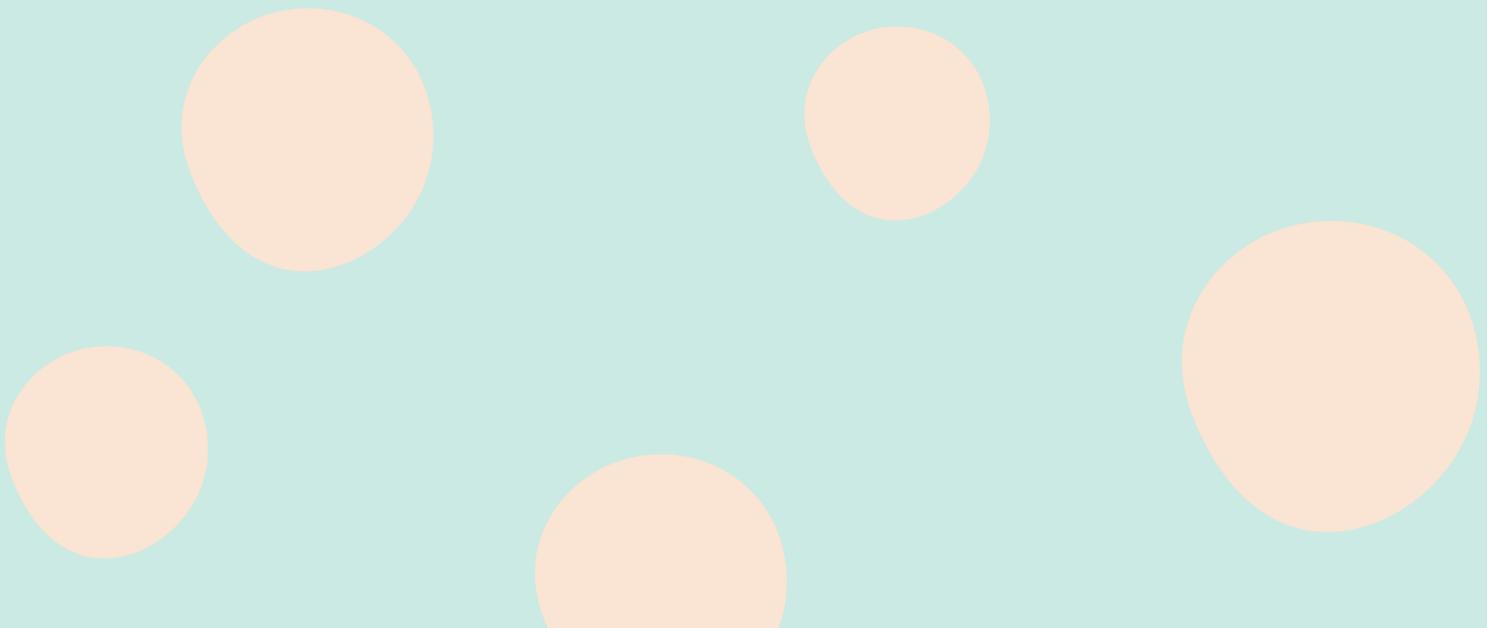


Signs to spot

Some students may experience anxiety related to specific situations such as attending college, contributing in class and social events. Other triggers include life changes, health issues, medication side effects, bereavement, loneliness or isolation, being abused or harassed, housing problems, financial worries and study or work pressures. Sometimes, the cause of the anxiety just isn't clear.

Potential indicators that a young person is struggling with anxiety include:

- feeling restless, worried or irritable
- having trouble concentrating or sleeping
- frequently experiencing symptoms like feeling sick, dizzy, sweating, trembling or a pounding heartbeat (palpitations)
- worry about everyday activities, such as meeting strangers, starting conversations, speaking on the phone, working or shopping
- avoiding or worrying a lot about social activities
- always worrying about doing something they think is embarrassing, such as blushing, sweating or appearing incompetent
- finding it difficult to do things when others are watching
- fear of being criticised or avoiding eye contact
- having panic attacks (an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety, usually only for a few minutes)
- using drugs or alcohol to try to reduce symptoms of anxiety
- using repetitive behaviours to alleviate anxiety symptoms.



How to start a conversation with a student if you're concerned

A good way to approach a student that you are worried about is by asking them for a 'check in' on how they are feeling.

Keep the conversation relaxed with a curious stance, and an open mind. Try to ask open ended questions rather than inadvertently appearing as though you already know how they are feeling and what is going on.

If a student is experiencing a panic attack currently, provide a quiet place and stay with them.

Ways you can support students:

- Ask if the student would like to talk about their worries and take them seriously. Show them you care by listening, offer empathy and understanding, and help them to solve problems.
- Normalise anxiety- it is a very common problem for many people.
- Encourage them to think about ways to keep their body and mind healthy. Exercise regularly, eating balanced meals, getting enough sleep, and staying connected to people can help to reduce anxiety symptoms.
- Help them to understand the "fight-flight-freeze" response which becomes activated in response to perceived danger.
- Offer help to research techniques that make them feel calmer when they are feeling really anxious or having a panic attack. For example, look up 'calming breathing techniques'. Breathing while counting (e.g. in for seven seconds and out for 11 seconds) can help them to stop and focus. Another one is called 'going through my senses'; to do this, name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.
- Encourage them to speak to their GP or a listening service.

Try to avoid:

- Making assumptions; ask the student what help they need rather than assuming or guessing.
- Minimising their anxious feelings if they seem to be upset over what you perceive to be a small thing.
- Using phrases such as 'calm down' or 'try to relax' which could make the symptoms worse.

Who else to involve

If you are worried that a young person is at risk, always follow your setting's safeguarding policies and procedures. Involve your designated safeguarding team as a matter of priority who will contact other services as necessary. If the young person is at immediate risk, ensure that they are taken to their GP or A&E as a matter of urgency, depending on the severity of the concern.

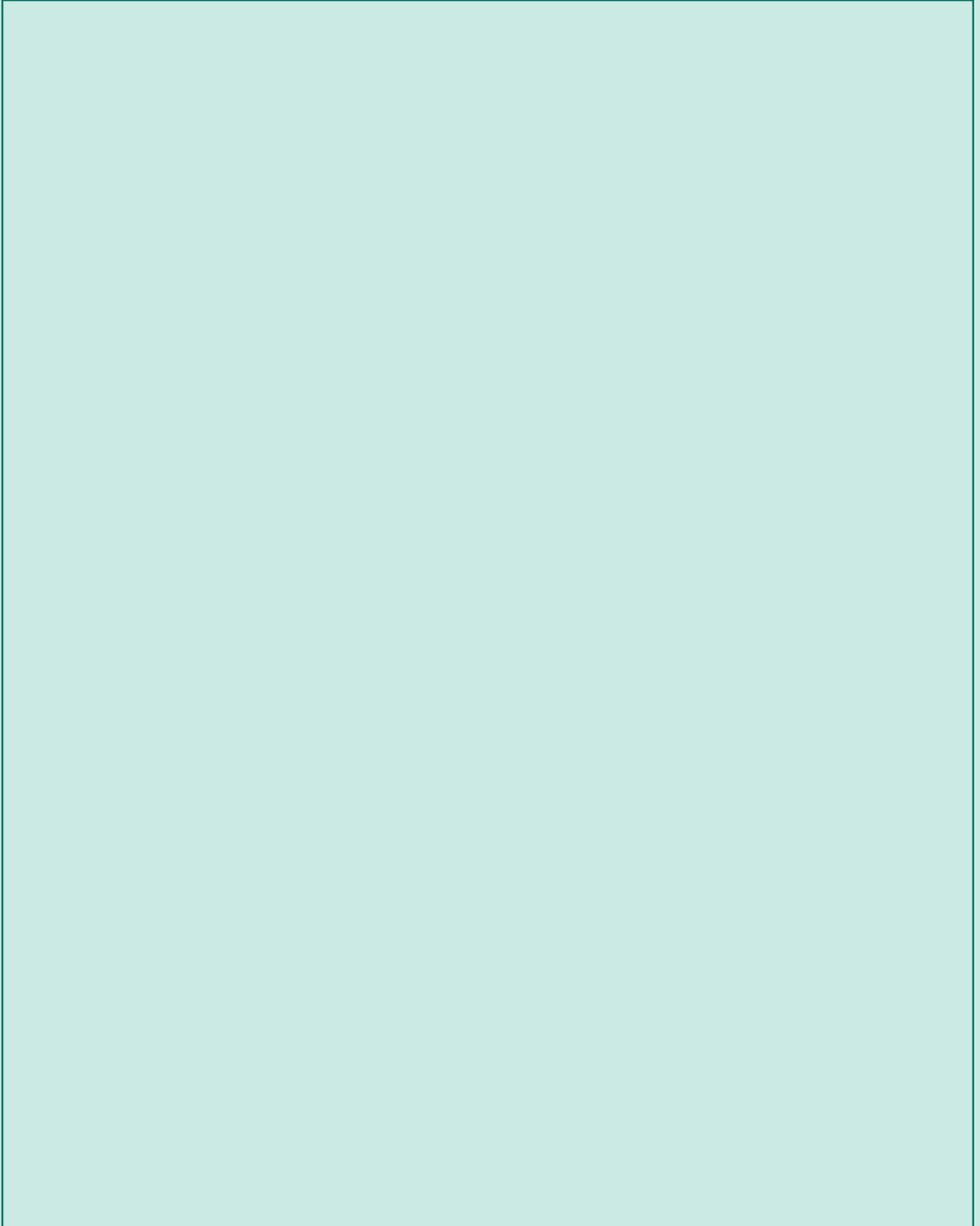
It's important to familiarise yourself with any local support services that are available in your area and ensure you understand the pathways for referring students.

Young people can find mental health support and guidance on the [On My Mind](#) section of the Anna Freud Centre's website.

Some national organisations who may also be able to offer support include:

- **Anxiety UK:** a national charity for those affected by anxiety, stress and anxiety based depression.
 - anxietyuk.org.uk
 - 03444 775 774
 - support@anxietyuk.org.uk
 - textline 07537 416 905
- **Kooth:** an online mental wellbeing community where young people can access free, safe and anonymous support.
 - kooth.com
- **AFC Crisis Messenger:** a free, confidential, 24/7 text support service.
 - Text AFC to 85258

Notes and reflections

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