

Understanding and Managing Anxiety in Palliative Care



This leaflet is for people receiving palliative care, who are struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings associated with anxiety.

We have put this leaflet together to give you a better understanding of what anxiety is and some techniques you can try at home to be able to respond to anxiety in a less distressing way by developing more resilience.



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the body's way of responding to a feeling of being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into the bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight (fight or flight) which creates the feeling of nausea or butterflies in the stomach, chest feeling tighter and breathing becoming more rapid which can be painful. This happens whether the danger is real or whether we believe it to be real when it is just a thought.

We all experience anxiety sometimes and at these times we naturally become more aware of it. When this happens the body's alarm system is activated so that we worry more and spend more time scanning for problems.

How do anxious thoughts and feelings affect you?

The way we experience anxiety can be broken down into thoughts, feelings, sensations and actions.

Thoughts:

- What if something bad happens?
- I won't be able to cope
- People don't understand me
- My mind jumps from worry to worry
- The worst case scenario is going to happen
- I am always on the look out for danger
- I can't do anything until these symptoms get better

Physical sensations:

- Shaking
- Wobbly legs
- Rapid heart rate
- Sense of dread
- Feeling faint
- Difficulty concentrating

Emotional feelings:

- Anxiety or worry
- Nervousness
- Restlessness
 - Fear or apprehension
- Overwhelmed or distressed
- Tense or on edge
- Irritable

Context/Situation

Behaviours and actions:

- Avoiding people, places or activities
- Not going out, or only going with someone
- Only going to places at a certain time e.g. smaller shops, at less busy times
- Not doing things I enjoy
- Unable to relax

Thoughts, feelings, actions, and physical sensations interact to keep us caught in a constant state of anxiety.

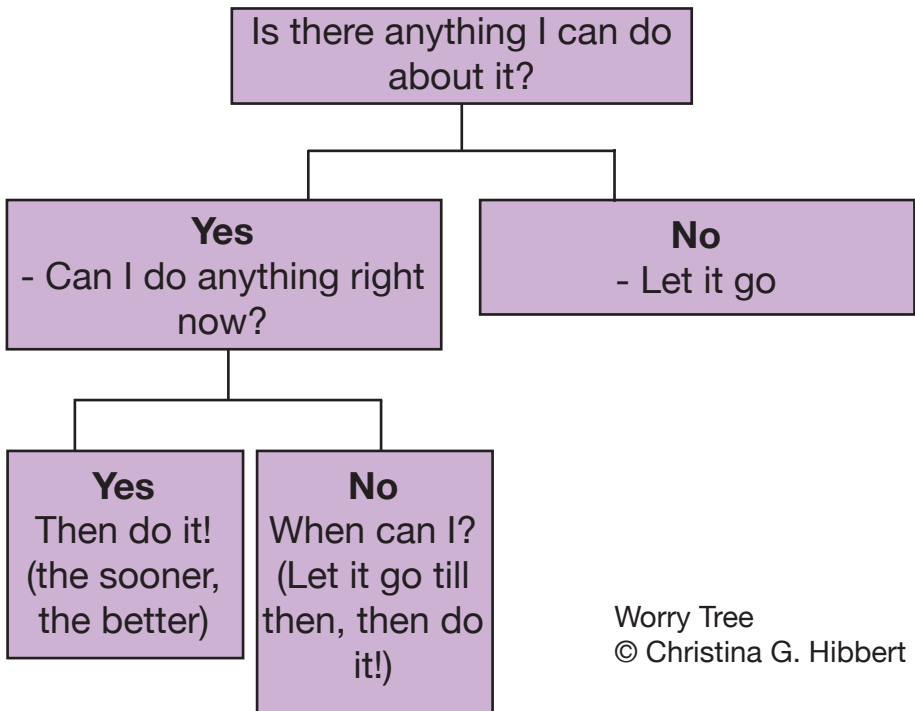
STRATEGIES - Developing Resilience

What can you do to help yourself?

The way we manage life when things are going well changes when we have to adjust to being diagnosed with a life-limiting illness. There are strategies that can help us respond differently to difficult thoughts and physical sensations, to become more resilient and less stuck.

**WORRYING ABOUT SOMETHING
WILL NOT CHANGE THE OUTCOME**

**Take a break from worrying – give your mind
a rest**



Worry Tree
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Distance from thoughts...

If you find yourself worrying and ruminating, try noticing thoughts as merely thoughts and not facts.

Say to yourself – *“I notice I’m having the thought that*”

Then letting the thought go and move onto something else. Label the thoughts – worrying/planning/ health thoughts. Visualise the thought drifting away like leaves on a stream.

If the same thought keeps returning, say to yourself *“I notice I’m having that thought again.....”* then repeat the process of letting go and moving on.



Distraction / Hobbies - focus on something else

Consider your usual routine and whether it includes activities that give you a sensation of satisfaction or pleasure. Building healthy, positive relationships with others can help good mental health.

Do something you enjoy and allow yourself to fully focus on it :

If you are watching TV and notice thoughts popping up, say to yourself *“there’s that thought again”*

Try to bring your full attention to what you are watching – really follow the plot, listen to the words, notice the images on the screen, what people are wearing, how they stand or move, what their voice is like.

Mindfulness - Being More Present

Create pause periods through the day to connect to your senses

- **What can I see ...**
- **What can I hear ...**
- **What can I feel/touch ...**
- **What can I smell...**
- **What can I taste ...**
- **How warm or cool am I / is it ...**

KNOW THAT EACH MOMENT WILL PASS...

It is useful to practice being more present daily or as often as you can.

The changes it brings are subtle and gradual.

There is no right or wrong way to be more connected to the present moment, it is simply being fully aware, as you are, where you are and how you are right now, rather than ruminating on the past or planning for the future.

Things to focus on when you are struggling to stay present:

Breath/body- physical sensations/specific parts...

Sounds - what sounds are you aware of...

Visual - really looking at something e.g. a pebble, leaf, your own hand, objects in the room- noticing the colours

Taste - textures of food or object

Temperature- the temperature in the room or of a cup you are holding

Thoughts - leaves on a stream - letting the thoughts go...

You can do this with any activity:

Reading, listening to music, doing puzzles, jigsaws, chatting with friend or family. Washing up, cooking, having a shower, getting dressed, washing your hands. Having a drink, eating, looking at an object that brings you pleasure, sitting quietly...

Do not worry if these strategies do not work for you straight away.

It takes regular practice to notice that you are distracted by thoughts and bring yourself back to being more present with what you are doing and experiencing.

THE SMALL MOMENTS ARE NOT SO SMALL - THEY ARE PRECIOUS

If you would like any further information about managing anxiety contact one of the Occupational Therapists, St Gemma's Hospice - **0113 218 5280**

Some useful links:

- St Gemma's Hospice - www.st-gemma.co.uk – Patient Hub - Mindfulness Meditations
- YouTube – Mindfulness + Relaxation Videos
- Apps – Mindfulness.com, Headspace, Relaxation Music
- Mind – www.mind.org.uk – Mental Health Charity
- NHS websites – information and Psychological Therapies

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