Anxiety, panic attacks and stress

*Anxiety* is a word we use to describe feelings of unease, worry and fear. It incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something. Although we usually find it unpleasant, anxiety is related to the ‘fight or flight’ response – our normal biological reaction to feeling threatened.

It’s common to feel tense, nervous and perhaps fearful at the thought of a stressful event or decision you’re facing – especially if it could have a big impact on your life.

Because anxiety is a normal human experience, it’s sometimes hard to know when it’s becoming a problem for you – but if your feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, it can be overwhelming. If anxiety is affecting your ability to live your life the way you’d like to, it’s worth thinking about ways to help yourself.

The most common anxiety disorders are: • generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) • panic disorder • obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) • phobias. Experiencing *panic* disorder can mean that you feel constantly afraid of having a panic attack, to the point that this fear itself can trigger your panic attacks. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) *Obsessive-compulsive* disorder is a diagnosis you might be given if your anxiety leads you to experience both: • obsessions – unwelcome thoughts, images, urges or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind • compulsions – repetitive activities that you feel you have to do. A *phobia* is an intense fear of something, even when that thing is very unlikely to be dangerous to you. If you have a phobia, your anxiety may be triggered by very specific situations or objects.

We all know what it's like to feel stressed, but it's not easy to pin down exactly what *stress* means. We might be talking about: situations or events that put pressure on us – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens: ur reaction to being placed under pressure – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with. It's overwhelming. Sometimes you can't see beyond the thick fog of stress. This can make it difficult for you to work out what causes your feelings of stress, or how to deal with them.

Being under pressure is a normal part of life. It can be a useful drive that helps you take action, feel more energised and get results. But if you often become overwhelmed by stress, these feelings could start to be a problem for you and make existing problems worse.

The most commonly prescribed talking treatment for anxiety, panic attacks and stress is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), because there is reliable evidence that it can be effective. CBT is a particular type of talking treatment which aims to identify connections between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and help you develop practical skills to manage these more positively.

It helps you understand your thought patterns, recognise your trigger points and identify positive actions you can take.