

Ease anxiety and loneliness

Feeling stressed, withdrawn and isolated can be tough on our mental health, but there are ways to ease the burden

2.47 million
The number of people in the UK, aged 45-64 years, who live alone.***

Most people will experience anxiety at some point in their lives. In fact, mixed anxiety and depression is the most common mental disorder in Britain*. But due to unprecedented world events, even more of us will be feeling vulnerable and alone right now. 'We can get trapped in a cycle of overthinking,' says psychotherapist Ali Moore. 'This causes raised heart rate and an increase of adrenaline, which can lead to insomnia, and then we worry about the worry, which makes the symptoms worse.' Sound familiar? Here's what can help...

Symptoms of anxiety

As well as feeling low, you could also be experiencing:

- Feelings of loss of control
- Tingling in the hands and feet
- Dizziness
- Breathing difficulty
- Nausea
- Perspiration

Meet our experts



Ali Moore is a psychotherapist at BeMoore (bemoore.uk)



Dr Meg Arroll is a chartered psychologist on behalf of Healthspan



Dr Nerina Ramlakhan is a sleep expert



Louise Murray is a qualified health and mindfulness coach (livewellwithlou.com)



For advice on how to help a friend who's stressed, turn to p25

Reset negative thoughts

'When you're feeling a bit low, replace any negative chatter in your head with positivity,' says Louise. 'This might mean listening to your favourite music, an uplifting podcast, or reading a book. If you choose a book or a podcast, set an alarm for 10 minutes, then you will come away feeling much more positive and ready to get on with the day again.'

Stop scrolling

Always checking for news? 'Some people don't even go to the toilet without their phone,' says sleep expert Dr Nerina Ramlakhan. 'This leaves no time to process things so our thoughts reappear and keep the mind going.'



Eat right, worry less

A healthy diet is key. 'This means eating well (including breakfast), staying hydrated and avoiding too much refined sugar,' says Dr Ramlakhan. Eat little and often – low blood sugar levels can trigger panic. And limit caffeinated drinks, as these can increase anxiety.

How to...

sleep when anxious

'At night, problems can suddenly appear a lot worse, especially before you go to bed,' says Dr Ramlakhan.

● TRY A HERBAL CURE

A Vogel Dormeasan Sleep (£10.49, Boots) is a blend of valerian root and hops to help aid anxious thoughts.

● EASE OFF THE BOOZE

It can be tempting, but alcohol disrupts sleep, so you're more likely to experience rebound anxiety the next morning.

● BREATHE

This NHS-recommended breathing exercise can relax your mind and body so you can switch off.

- 1 LIE IN BED arms away from your sides, palms up.
- 2 BREATHE DEEPLY in through your nose, counting from one to five (or as far as you can, comfortably).
- 3 WITHOUT PAUSING breathe out gently through your mouth, counting to five again. Keep going for 3-5 mins.



Coping in isolation

Connecting with others in person is not easy right now, which, in turn, isn't good for our health – research has found that loneliness can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day**. But a change of mindset could help. 'A significant emotional differentiation between being alone and being lonely is having the ability to feel positive and happy when alone,' says chartered psychologist Dr Meg Arroll. 'Creative pursuits can be joyous when done alone.' Try learning a new skill, or working in the garden, and try to celebrate your self-sufficiency.



Take a TV break

Dipping into your favourite shows can be a good way to distract your mind from the worries of the world, but limit your screen time. Too much passive activity can make feelings of loneliness worse.

Get moving, if you can

Possible to go for a walk? Try listening to a walking meditation at headspace.com as you go. It's currently offering free meditation downloads called weathering the storm. A guided meditation will help clear your mind, while walking releases endorphins, which can ease anxiety. Stretching or dancing can also give you a boost.



Staying connected is key to happiness

1 PICK UP THE PHONE

Chatting to a friend can help. No one to talk to? The Silver Line is a free 24-hour phone line and befriending service for people over the age of 55. Call 0800 470 8090.

2 GET ONLINE

Email, text, social media and Skype are all good ways to keep in touch. Joining an online community can also help.

3 REACH OUT

Check out charities Mind (mind.org.uk) and Samaritans (samaritans.org) for help and support.



Calm feelings of panic

If you're overwhelmed and alone, a calming technique can help. 'Make yourself a warm drink and sit down,' says qualified health and mindfulness coach Louise Murray. 'Notice three things in this moment, such as the colour of the drink, the weight of the mug, the feeling of the chair. Then breathe into your shoulders, relax them down and enjoy your cuppa, savouring the flavour. Return to the senses whenever you notice your mind straying.'

WORDS: FAYE M SMITH. PHOTOS: GETTY, ALAMY. *HEALTH CHARITY NO PANIC. **OFFICE OF NATIONAL STATISTICS. ***AGE UK. IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH, SEE YOUR GP.