



Overcoming Anxiety

If you or someone you care about has identified having an anxiety problem, this sheet will help you understand what the journey out of problematic anxiety entails & how it can be supported.

Anxiety is a normal part of everyone's life. Anxiety is a survival mechanism that prepares us to act when we detect a physical or social threat in our environment that we will need to manage. When we doubt our ability to handle things we need to be on the look-out for potential threats and anxiety experiences become more intense, more prolonged and more frequent than usual. When those experiences are coupled with attempts to cope by avoidance and/or suppression, we become stuck in a cycle of anxiety that decreases positive experiences of the world and makes every aspect of daily life a struggle. Nearly a quarter of all New Zealanders will be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder in their lives, and even more people will struggle with it without receiving a diagnosis.

→ In order to break the cycle of anxiety people usually need to:

- » Learn that they can handle things and have skills to cope.
- » Experience themselves surviving anxiety.
- » Learn to pay attention to their strengths and successes.
- » Learn how to breathe properly.
- » Learn coping skills that make the moment workable without limiting life.
- » Express their thoughts and feelings regularly.
- » Build a support network and use it.
- » Develop self-care routines – sleep, movement, nutrition, hydration...

→ It helps to have supportive people around who:

- ✓ Acknowledge the strengths they see in you and the things they like about you.
- ✓ Let you know when they think you've done something well.
- ✓ Are open about their own difficulties and let you know you are not alone. Often it is the thought '*I am the only one*' that keeps people silent and unable to access support.
- ✓ Let you know that they believe in your capacity to overcome it.
- ✓ Prompt you to try out some of your strategies when they notice you are becoming anxious or do the strategy with you if you need help to stay focused on it.
- ✓ Talk about what helps *them* to cope and improve their mood. Sharing skills and tools is an excellent way to connect and support each other.
- ✓ Show kindness – people with anxiety problems are typically hard on ourselves all the time and sometimes the smallest acts of kindness and compassion make a big difference.
- ✓ Keep in regular contact so you have plenty of opportunities to practice the new skills you are learning.
- ✓ Understand how to support someone with anxiety problems.

It can be a good idea to share this information sheet with your support networks. If you don't have these kinds of people in your life, or you find it difficult to connect with them, we strongly recommend that you connect with a counsellor, psychologist or other community group to ensure you have regular opportunities for each of the above experiences.



If You Are A Supporter...

You Can Help By:

- ✓ Inviting your friend or family-member to take part in things – your friend or family member wishes they could take part in things, but anxiety prevents them. Please persevere with your invitations and don't take it personally if they repeatedly cancel or say no. They are doing their best and if you continue to make gentle offers, one day they will be able to accept them.
- ✓ Letting anxiety and other negative emotions be acceptable parts of human experience. When it is okay to feel anxious, the need to suppress and avoid it reduces, and then so does the feeling of anxiety itself. When your friend or family member says they feel anxious, ask them what they need to feel better and if you can, help them to soothe their fears.
- ✓ Supporting them to reduce any alcohol or drug intake. These coping strategies bypass the need to learn other ways of coping and make it more difficult to overcome problematic anxiety. If you regularly interact with your friend or family member by drinking alcohol or taking drugs together, try to incorporate some other, sober forms of interaction and activity.
- ✓ Understanding that intense anxiety is designed to overtake all of our thought processes so all of our resources can be directed towards surviving the threat. Once it has been fully triggered, it is very difficult to turn our thoughts to other things or access a wider perspective by ourselves. When your friend or family member is in this, they need you to understand that it isn't their fault and that it is normal. Sometimes the worst bit about problematic anxiety is the worry about how you will be judged for it. Your understanding will mean the world.
- ✓ Trusting your friend or family member to handle things – that can seem hard, but often when people help too quickly or too often, it can inadvertently keep us feeling dependent.
- ✓ Trusting your friend or family member to know when they need help – asking for help is an important skill and sometimes not being able to ask for help is part of what keeps us anxious.

Please Try Not To...

- ✗ Express distress or disapproval about your friend or family member's anxiety – your friend or family member is trying to learn that anxiety is acceptable and okay.
- ✗ Make derogatory jokes about your friend or family member's anxiety problem or attempts to cope with it. That is not to say humour isn't a useful way of easing tension sometimes, but derogatory humour or labels will undermine their efforts to think good things about themselves.
- ✗ Emphasise the mistakes they make or the times when they don't seem to cope very well. They are an expert at emphasising their own perceived failures and they are trying to unlearn that way of being.
- ✗ Use their past mistakes or difficulties as evidence that they will encounter the same difficulties or make the same mistakes in the future. Your friend or family member is trying to learn that they have the capacity to make their future experiences better.
- ✗ Encourage excessive drinking or drug-taking.
- ✗ Expect them to be able to do everything they learn about straight away.

If you are finding it difficult to cope with your friend or family member's anxiety problem, you may like to access some counselling to help *you* cope. It is not easy when someone we care about struggles with something or begins to implement change in their lives.