

For young people and their parents

Information about

# ANXIETY IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The disorder, its treatment and prevention



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**This brochure is about anxiety in children and young people.** It is mainly intended for young people with anxiety receiving treatment in Region Midtjylland and for the parents of children and young people who have been diagnosed with anxiety. The brochure describes what anxiety is and how it can be treated. At the back of the brochure, there are a number of useful tips for children and young people with anxiety, and for their parents.

**We hope** this brochure will help you and your family to learn more about anxiety.

Yours sincerely

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## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety, fear and worry are natural reactions that everyone experiences at times.

Anxiety and fear can protect us in situations when we feel threatened, because anxiety makes us take care of ourselves. Worrying can be useful, too, because it makes us think twice instead of acting in a hurry. In moderate doses, anxiety, fear and worry help us as individuals to think twice and act sensibly.

“ **I had so many dreadful thoughts about what might happen when it got dark and it was time to go to sleep that I had to sleep with my parents in their bed. I could not sleep anywhere else, and I could not go to holiday camp; it was no fun at all.** ”

Line, age 13

It is natural for a child to experience anxiety at different stages of development. Anxiety may occur, for example, when a small child is separated from their parents because they are starting nursery. A slightly older child will typically be afraid of the dark or of strangers. Teenagers may have difficulty relating to the physical

changes in their bodies and social changes to do with friends, boyfriends/girlfriends and parties. Experiencing brief periods of anxiety is natural and does not mean the child has an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety only becomes a mental disorder when it “goes haywire”, so to speak, and interferes with everyday life in a disturbing and inappropriate way. For example, if anxiety prevents a child from having normal schooling, if anxiety makes it impossible to be around friends, or if the child is afraid to leave the house on their own.

In everyday parlance, we could call anxiety being “worried sick” to the extent that the child or young person tries to avoid anything that causes anxiety and fear.

Anxiety sometimes affects family life, too. This can happen if so much consideration is given to the child’s anxiety that the family is no longer able to function as it usually does – for example if the child is so afraid to go to school that mum or dad has to stay home from work. Or if the child has to sleep with their parents because they are so nervous about sleeping in their own bed.



# SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

Anxiety affects a person's body, thoughts and behaviour.

## Body

When you feel anxious, your body prepares for fight or flight. That is why you experience palpitations, tense muscles and rapid breathing. Mentally, you are "on guard", too, and highly aware of everything around you.

A child or young person with anxiety will often complain of stomach aches, headaches, diarrhoea, vomiting or tiredness.

## Thoughts

Anxiety makes a person persistently worry that there is a danger or threat that is about to happen. You might think that an accident will happen to you or your family, that you are going to do something wrong, or that you will be humiliated in public.

These negative thoughts are full of disastrous scenarios, and you are unable to see the situation from a less threatening perspective.

## Behaviour

A person's behaviour – what we say and do – is automatically affected by negative thoughts and physical reactions. You may respond with crying or angry outbursts; you may be tense, distressed or feverish, or wander around restlessly.

At the same time, you will try to avoid whatever makes you anxious. In other words, you adopt "avoidance behaviour". It may be obvious "overt avoidance", for example refusing to sleep in a darkened room if you are afraid of the dark. Or it may be more subtle "covert [hidden] avoidance", e.g. using a headache as an excuse if you are afraid of attending a social event.

“ I was scared to go to school. I was so afraid of saying something stupid, blushing, stammering or giving the wrong answer in class in case the teacher and my classmates laughed at me. In the end, I was even afraid to go outside; I was terrified of doing something wrong in some way. ”

Philip, age 14

# TYPES OF ANXIETY

Children and young people may experience different types of anxiety:

## **Single phobias**

Single phobias (also called specific phobias) are anxiety about very specific situations or things. For example, a child may be afraid of snakes, heights, needles or the dark. The child will make every effort to avoid whatever they find frightening.

## **Separation anxiety**

Separation anxiety is anxiety about being separated from a close caregiver or caregivers – usually the mother. This anxiety can manifest itself at home, when the child may follow their parents around the house. It can also occur on arriving at childcare or school, where the child will resist or react with anxiety.

In an older child or young person, separation anxiety can manifest itself

in connection with holiday camp or sports events. Here, being away from home for an extended period may make the child very homesick. At the same time, the child will often be extremely worried that something terrible will happen while they are separated from their parents.

## **Generalised anxiety**

A pronounced tendency to worry or feel anxious about a wide variety of situations is known as generalised anxiety. The child worries about big things and little things. It could be about performance at school or in sports. It could be about being good enough as a friend, brother or sister. Children may worry about bodily symptoms and their health, appearance or what they say and do. The child may also worry about the TV news. Often the parents need to repeatedly reassure the child that everything will be OK.

“ I was afraid to watch the TV news or listen to the news on the radio because it was really scary to hear about what was going on in the world. I got really scared and I started thinking about when it would happen to us. ”

Trine, age 11



### **Social anxiety**

Social anxiety is when someone is anxious and worried about social situations. They worry that other people will think badly of them. The child will often appear embarrassed and inhibited, and resist entering into situations involving meeting new people. These can include parties, clubs or going out shopping. The child will also avoid talking to shop assistants.

The child can also be anxious about showing visible signs of anxiety, such as blushing, trembling, vomiting, etc.

### **Panic disorder**

Panic disorder is a pronounced worry or fear of suddenly getting a panic attack and being totally helpless. Young people experience panic attacks more than children.

The attack often comes “out of the blue” and involves heart palpitations, sweating, dizziness, prickly bodily sensations and shortness of breath.

Someone who has experienced a number of panic attacks can be so scared of getting another one that they no longer want to leave the house and isolate themselves at home instead.

### **DIFFERENT DEGREES OF ANXIETY**

All types of anxiety occur to different extent. At one end of the scale, a child may be so anxious that they are unable to go to school or be with friends. At the other end of the scale a child may have mild anxiety, only noticing the anxiety in some situations, and coping as well as their peers the rest of the time. The amount of anxiety troubling some children may vary from day to day, too.

### **OTHER DISORDERS?**

Many children and young people have more than one kind of anxiety. In addition to anxiety, some children also have other mental disorders or developmental disorders. These could be learning difficulties, ADHD or autism, for example.

## WHY DO SOME CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SUFFER FROM ANXIETY?

There is no single explanation for why some children and young people develop anxiety. A number of different factors influence whether this disorder arises.

In some cases, a specific event or cause of stress triggers the anxiety, for example if the child's parents divorce, if there is a death in the family, if there is a break-in at home, or if the child is teased at school. In other cases, the anxiety seems to come out of the blue. Something that can lead to anxiety in one person may simply be a temporary stress factor for someone else.

Scientific studies indicate that there is no specific anxiety gene. In other words, anxiety cannot be hereditary. However, researchers have identified an emotional sensitivity that can be genetic. In some families, for example, one parent is clearly of a more nervous disposition than the other. In other families, more severe anxiety is evident in one of the parents or other close relatives.

Being born with this emotional sensitivity makes it more likely that the child will become a loving, caring, even popular person. At the same time, however, there is also a greater risk that the child will develop worry, anxiety and sadness as they get older.

By being over-protective, a parent can reinforce and even encourage anxiety as the child develops. If one or both parents are themselves troubled

### DID YOU KNOW...?

The vast majority of anxiety disorders start in childhood. 80% of anxiety sufferers are under 20 at the onset of the disorder.

with anxiety, the child can easily pick up on the parents' view of the world as a dangerous place. As a result, the child may start to imitate the parents' avoidance behaviour.

For example, if the mother is afraid of answering the phone when it rings because not knowing who is on the other end of the phone triggers anxiety, her child may automatically feel the same way. Accordingly, the child learns that

answering the phone is "dangerous" and therefore starts to avoid it – even though the child was not originally afraid of the telephone.

### **DID YOU KNOW...?**

The sooner an anxiety disorder is treated, the easier it is to eliminate.

## **HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?**

Sometimes, symptoms of anxiety can mimic symptoms of a physical illness. If this happens, the first thing to do is exclude the possibility of a physical illness. An examination by your GP will clarify this.

If, in the GP's opinion, your symptoms are not due to a somatic illness, you will be referred to the child and adolescent mental health services, where a therapist will talk to you and your parents. The therapist will ask what symptoms of anxiety you experience, what situations

give rise to anxiety, and how your anxiety has developed.

The therapist will also ask your parents about your early development, and whether you have had any other difficulties. Together, you will also discuss whether anyone else in your family suffers from anxiety or other mental disorders.

Based on the overall examination, a diagnosis will be made via the diagnosis system used in Denmark (ICD-10).



# HOW DO YOU TREAT ANXIETY?

The child and adolescent mental health services can give you therapy for anxiety. You and your parents can also receive psychoeducation, in which you will learn about what anxiety is. You may also benefit from anxiety medication; your doctor will assess this.

The first line of treatment is psycho-education, cognitive behavioural therapy and respite. Respite means being released from the everyday things that burden you. For example, it may mean being released from some lessons at school for a while to help you get through the day.

A doctor specialising in psychiatry will always be the one to determine the most appropriate treatment for you. During your treatment, you may meet doctors, psychologists, nurses and other professionals.

## Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation means being taught about anxiety; this teaching programme will be offered to you and your parents. In the programme, you will find out what anxiety is, how the disorder arises, what symptoms to look for, and how anxiety usually develops. You will also receive information about medical therapy and psychotherapy.

## KNOW YOUR ANXIETY

Misconceptions about the condition are common if a person does not know very much about anxiety. You may believe you are physically ill because of palpitations, butterflies in the stomach, etc. Or you may believe other people think you are a bit strange, or that you look odd, and that they will generally be very critical of you.

It is important for both you and your parents to receive psychoeducation to learn which kind of anxiety you have. Just learning that your symptoms are due to a well-described (treatable) mental disorder can help to calm you.

## Therapy

You may be offered a number of individual appointments with a therapist; these are usually combined with joint counselling involving your parents to one extent or another. You may also be offered the opportunity to participate in group therapy, where you and your parents will join a number of other families with a child or young person who has anxiety. Working with your therapist, you and your parents will identify which type of treatment is best for you.

Excellent results have been obtained from the psychotherapy method known as cognitive behavioural therapy. In brief, cognitive behavioural therapy is about gradually, systematically and by agreement doing the very thing you are afraid of. Gradually, as you challenge whatever you are afraid of, you will

“ **My anxiety got a lot better after I started going to the psychologist.** It was such a relief to discover that my awful worries about disasters were not reality. I learned to tell myself: Maiken, you can imagine a whole lot of dreadful things that could happen, but remember, these are just thoughts and luckily thoughts are not reality. Instead, you could just as well start thinking good thoughts about things that could happen. ”

Maiken, age 13

recognise that what you fear is less dangerous than you believed.

For example, if you are afraid of drowning when swimming in deep water, you could start by going into shallow water where you can touch the bottom, and where you do not mind being. Then you should slowly move out into slightly deeper water and work on gaining confidence there. Keep going like that – step by step – until you are out in deep water.

During the process, you must work with your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and actions. For example: I am aware that I become afraid of drowning, and that my pulse and breathing get faster when I can no longer touch the bottom, but I know these are just emotions and non-dangerous bodily sensations, and that in reality I have nothing to be afraid of. When I can no longer touch the bottom because I am in deep water, I have to focus on starting to swim. I must remind myself that I have been practising swimming in shallow water, and I have plenty of experience of actually being able to swim in shallow water, so I have to do the same thing when I am in deep water.

Cognitive behavioural therapy will also help you to challenge your thoughts of impending disaster by talking about whether they are likely, and how you can learn to think differently and more realistically.

As you undergo therapy, you will also learn that the symptoms of your anxiety are not dangerous. You will learn to distinguish between them and to register that you have these to different degrees, and that they are often related to the way you think and act. Your treatment will also equip you with some “tools” – strategies to overcome anxiety that you can use both in therapy and in future.

### **Medication**

Sometimes it may be necessary to supplement cognitive therapy with medication. You will usually be offered anxiety medication if you have severe or chronic anxiety, and therapy has not helped sufficiently. The medication will reduce your anxiety. Afterwards, it will generally

SSRI stands for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter in the brain that acts on some of the chemical processes in the brain that occur in someone with an anxiety disorder. SSRI-type drugs are used in the treatment of both depression and anxiety.

be easier to work therapeutically with your anxiety.

SSRI-type antidepressants are generally used to treat anxiety.

If you are prescribed medication, it will be in consultation with a doctor.



The doctor will make a plan for how long you are to take your medication. To avoid side-effects, it is important to begin with a small dose of medicine that can then be slowly increased to the full dose.

Like any other medication, anxiety medication may cause side-effects. Not everyone experiences side-effects, and if you do, it is usually just when you start the treatment.

The most frequently occurring side-effects are nausea, vomiting or constipation, difficulty sleeping, nervousness, anxiousness and physical restlessness. Very rarely, young people (with depression) have experienced new or increased thoughts of suicide when starting on the medication.

When on your medication, you must visit your doctor for check-ups. Your doctor will determine whether the treatment is working as intended, and whether you are on the right dose. The doctor will talk to you about side-effects and consider whether you would benefit from switching to a different medication.



# IS ANXIETY PREVENTABLE?

The purpose of both psychotherapy and medication is to prevent relapses.

In therapy, you will gradually learn to challenge whatever triggers your anxiety. You can use the strategies you have developed during your sessions in new and different situations that cause you anxiety. Your therapist will talk to you about that once you both know you are coming to the end of your course of therapy.

In addition, you and your therapist will also work to find out what factors cause

you stress in your everyday life, and what you can do to reduce that stress.

If you are given medication, it will help you to do better at challenging your anxiety in everyday situations – and ultimately to overcome it.

In any case, it is important for you to take care of your general health: eat a healthy, varied diet, make sure you get a good night's sleep, get fresh air and exercise and – not least – remember to spend time with the people you care most about.

## ADVICE FOR PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM ANXIETY

Anxiety, fear and worry might make you want to avoid the things you are afraid of, but that is a bad idea. The special thing about anxiety is that it tends to grow and grow if you try to avoid what makes you anxious.

Instead, wish for the things you want to be able to do, but that anxiety is preventing you from doing. For example, you could think about things your peers are able to do, but which, because of your anxiety, you are unable to do. The best thing you can do to help yourself is to defy your fear and gradually start doing whatever you are afraid of. Then, as time goes by, you will find your thoughts about various scary scenarios are actually far worse than what you experience in reality. And you need to experience and feel in your own body that the reality is far more peaceful and positive than your fears. You need help for this process, both from a professional therapist and from your parents. Your therapist

can work with you to make a plan with small, specific steps that can help you to defy your fear, and strategies that you can use to succeed. Your therapist can also help you to remember all the positive steps you take along the way, and help you to press on if you have any setbacks. Your parents can support, encourage and help you to stay focused on the goals you have set.

Neither your parents nor your therapist can eliminate the anxiety for you. You are the one who must decide to fight your anxiety. It is a known fact that the more often people defy their anxiety, the sooner their treatment will work.

When you are in therapy for anxiety, other aspects of your life may also need to be taken care of. Fighting anxiety is tough. That is why you may need other demands on you to be reduced. For example, perhaps you need fewer demands at school for a while.

# ADVICE FOR PARENTS

Participate in the psychoeducation, which gives you more information about anxiety.

It may also be a good idea to read books about anxiety to broaden your understanding of what anxiety is and how it is treated.

You can request sessions with your child's therapist to gain more in-depth knowledge about anxiety and get specific advice on how you can both support your child.

Be open towards your child when you feel challenged by something that makes you nervous, and explain how you yourselves work constructively to overcome this nervousness. That way, you can be good role models.

If one of you has a tendency towards anxiety, it is important for that person to set boundaries and work with their own worries to avoid transferring them to the child.

Avoid being overprotective towards your child; that will only make the anxiety worse. Avoid reinforcing the child's avoidance behaviour. Instead, support

your child by encouragement, specific strategies and agreements to participate in familiar activities and contexts.

Avoid showing your child any annoyance or disappointment. Instead, try to help them to see their own situation, and the consequences the anxiety has for them, and try to encourage them to challenge the anxiety.

Speak to your child and explain that anxiety is just thoughts, not reality, and that the anxiety has made them see everything in a negative light.

Speak to your child about what they would want to do if the anxiety did not prevent it. Encourage your child to accept treatment, and give your full support.

If your son or daughter's anxiety manifests itself at school or in leisure activities, agree together that you will inform their teachers or daycare staff about the anxiety. Speak to professionals about how best to support your son or daughter to challenge their anxiety. It will be a big help for your child to have the same understanding of their difficulties at home, at school and in leisure activities.

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## Where can you find **MORE INFORMATION** ?

**psykinfomidt.dk**

Region Midtjylland's Mental Health Services Information Centre.  
Here, for example, you can find the "Antidepressants" brochure,  
where you can read more about SSRI-type drugs

**angstforeningen.dk**

**boernmedangst.dk**

Foreningen for børn med angst (Danish society for children with anxiety)

Scan the QR code to access  
more facts about antidepressants,  
useful links, videos, books, etc.





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