

FREE WORKSHEET · THOUGHTS & FEELINGS

When Anxiety Spikes

Understand the anxiety cycle, and how to step out of it

Anxiety is the body's alarm system. When the brain senses a threat, it prepares you to act: the heart speeds up, breathing quickens, muscles tense and attention narrows. These feelings are uncomfortable, sometimes frightening, but they are not dangerous.

The problem is that the alarm can go off when there is no real danger, and the ways we try to stop it often make it louder next time.

IF YOU NEED HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. The Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

01

The anxiety cycle

Trigger

A situation, thought or sensation.

Anxious thought

"Something bad will happen. I won't cope."

Body alarm

Racing heart, tight chest, shaky, hot.

Escape

Avoid, leave, check, seek reassurance. Relief, for now.

The relief is real, but it teaches the brain that the situation was dangerous and that escape was what saved you. So the next time, the alarm goes off sooner and louder. Over time, more of life can end up organised around avoiding it.

Map one of your own.

TRIGGER	ANXIOUS THOUGHT	WHAT MY BODY DID	WHAT I DID TO ESCAPE

02

Stepping out of it

The way out is to face what you avoid, gradually, and stay long enough for the anxiety to settle on its own. Each time, the brain learns the situation is safer than it feared.

Build a ladder: from the least to the most anxiety-provoking step.

STEP	WHAT I WILL DO	ANXIETY EXPECTED (0 TO 10)	DONE
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Start with a step around 3 or 4 out of 10, and repeat it until it feels easier before moving up. If anxiety is stopping you doing everyday things, talk to your GP. In England you can also refer yourself to NHS Talking Therapies.