

## Patient information factsheet

# Coping with anxiety when you have a heart condition

A diagnosis of a heart condition can lead to feelings of anxiety and worry. It is normal to experience some difficult feelings as you adjust to life after your diagnosis, but for some people, anxiety and worry may not get better naturally. This factsheet explains how these symptoms might affect you and how they can be managed. We hope it helps to answer some of your questions.

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the body's reaction to feeling threatened or in danger. It can cause:

- feelings of fear and unease
- physical feelings in your body
- changes to your thoughts and behaviour.

### What causes anxiety?

Anxiety is part of the body's natural 'fight, flight or freeze' alarm system that helps us react quickly to potential threats. When we feel under threat or in danger, our bodies release a hormone called adrenaline. In dangerous situations, this helps us to react quickly and keep us safe.

Anxiety can be a helpful response when we need to be kept safe. However, sometimes our brains think there is danger when there is none, which can lead to the symptoms listed below. This is when anxiety might start to affect your life in unhelpful ways.

### What are the symptoms of anxiety?

We have included some examples in the table below of how anxiety can affect you after receiving a heart condition diagnosis.

| Physical and emotional symptoms of anxiety   | Thoughts you may have   | Actions in response to anxiety   |
|--|---|--|
| <p>You may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feel anxious and/or fearful</li> <li>• feel irritable</li> <li>• feel as though something bad is about to happen</li> <li>• have a racing heart</li> <li>• shake and sweat</li> <li>• be breathless or have fast breathing</li> </ul> | <p>You may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• worry about the future</li> <li>• expect the worst to happen</li> <li>• worry about doing too much and damaging your heart</li> <li>• worry about dying</li> </ul> | <p>You may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• research your heart condition more than is necessary</li> <li>• ask for reassurance more often</li> <li>• avoid activities that now cause you to have anxious feelings</li> <li>• move and exercise less</li> </ul> |

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## What can I do to help manage my anxiety?

If your symptoms of anxiety are mild, you might find the tips below help you to feel a little better.

- Challenge yourself to do things you are avoiding. Start off with something small and gradually build up to help your anxiety decrease over time.
- Try using the 'worry tree'. For more information, search 'worry tree' online or visit: [www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/self-help-cbt-techniques/tackling-your-worries](http://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/self-help-cbt-techniques/tackling-your-worries)
- If you are worried about moving and exercising safely, ask your general practitioner (GP) or cardiac nurse or doctor (if you have one).
- Try breathing and grounding techniques (exercises that can help you focus on the present moment to help ease anxious feelings). For a list of grounding techniques, visit: [www.therapistaid.com/therapy-article/grounding-techniques-article](http://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-article/grounding-techniques-article)

These tips are not a 'cure' for anxiety, but they may help you to cope in difficult moments. It is important to talk to your cardiac specialist or GP if you make any changes to what you are doing (for example, increasing your activity levels), so that you do it safely.

## When should I seek help?

If your anxiety hasn't improved over time and you are finding it hard to do the things you want to, you may benefit from some additional support.

## Talking therapies

Talking therapies are psychological treatments for mental and emotional problems like anxiety, depression and stress. There are lots of different types of talking therapy, but they all involve working with a trained therapist. This may be one-to-one, in a group, online, over the phone, with your family, or with your partner.

For more information about NHS talking therapies, visit:

[www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/types-of-talking-therapies](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/types-of-talking-therapies)

## How can I access talking therapies?

You can access talking therapies for free on the NHS. You can refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service without a referral from a GP, or a GP or specialist nurse can refer you.

| <b>If your GP is located within Southampton City</b>   | <b>If your GP is located outside of Southampton City but within Southampton</b>  | <b>If your GP is located somewhere else</b>  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Steps2Wellbeing</b><br>Telephone: <b>0800 612 7000</b><br>Website: <a href="http://www.steps2wellbeing.co.uk">www.steps2wellbeing.co.uk</a> | <b>NHS Talking Therapies Hampshire</b><br>Telephone: <b>023 8038 3920</b><br>Website: <a href="http://www.italk.org.uk">www.italk.org.uk</a> | You can visit the link below to find your local NHS talking therapies service: <a href="http://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service">www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service</a> or ask your GP |

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## Useful links

[www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/support/emotional-support-and-wellbeing/coping-with-anxiety-when-you-have-a-heart-condition](http://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/support/emotional-support-and-wellbeing/coping-with-anxiety-when-you-have-a-heart-condition)

[www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling](http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling)

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation)

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