

# Tackling Anxiety Collectively

A TEAM DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK  
FOR NORMALISING THE CONVERSATION

# Introduction

We all experience anxiety at some point so let's have a straightforward chat about it...

- No specialists involved.
- No prior knowledge necessary.
- No 'wrong' answers possible.
- No problem with 'don't knows' from any level of seniority.

These 10 steps will guide you through a process to explore how to understand and manage anxiety.

Each part explains key information about anxiety along with a specific point to discuss as a team. Divide into smaller groups if your team is too large for this conversation to feel comfortable.



# Defining Anxiety

## Step 1

In your team discuss how you would define anxiety.

Then compare it to this definition:

*Anxiety is defined by persistent, excessive worries about things that are going to happen or which we think might happen. It is a feeling of stress, panic or fear that is normal when we feel under threat, and it can affect your everyday life.*

# Symptoms of Anxiety

We can experience anxiety in different ways. Some symptoms include:

Physiological	Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioural
Muscle tension	Worry	Hypervigilance	Social withdrawal
Stomach ache	Anticipation		Avoidance of activities
Disturbed sleep	Fear	Poor concentration	Reduced work performance
Fatigue	Forgetfulness	Repetitive negative thoughts	Inability to manage day-to-day tasks
Pounding heart	Irritability	Confusion	Dependance on unhealthy coping mechanisms e.g. drugs and alcohol
Indigestion			
Sweating			
Shaking			
Nausea/ diarrhoea			
Change in breathing			

## Step 2

Identify and share your own symptoms of anxiety. What do other people observe? (This helps you to increase your self-awareness).

# Scaling Anxiety

A great way to extend this conversation is to scale your symptoms, particularly in different situations.

This simple anxiety measurement scale, adapted from Bourne's scale (1990), lists typical symptoms:

0	Relaxation	Feeling at ease
1	Slight Anxiety	Passing twinge of anxiety; feeling slightly nervous
2	Mild Anxiety	Butterflies in stomach; muscle tension
3	Moderate Anxiety	Feeling uncomfortable but still in control; heart rate increasing; more rapid breathing, sweaty palms
4	Marked Anxiety	Feeling uncomfortable; worry about losing control; heart beating fast; muscles tight
5	Early Panic	Heart pounding or beating irregularly; constricted breathing; dizziness; fear of losing control; compulsion to escape
6	Moderate Panic Attack	Palpitations; difficulty breathing; feeling disoriented or detached; panic in response to perceived loss of control; compulsion to escape
7-10	Major Panic Attack	More intense symptoms experienced at level 6; terror; fear of going crazy or dying; compulsion to escape

## Step 3

**Consider questions such as: Where do you spend most of the time? What is the range of anxiety that you can experience? How quickly do you move up/ down the scale? What do other people observe?**

# Causes of Anxiety

Common causes of anxiety include:

- **Previous life experiences** e.g. being bullied.
- **Current life situation** e.g. build up of stress, change and uncertainty, financial worries, menopause, working long hours, housing problems, relationship problems, feeling isolated, being bullied.
- **Physical and mental health problems** – living with a serious, ongoing or life-threatening condition, and experiencing other conditions such as depression.
- **Medication and substance use** – some medications cause side effects, and the use of drugs and alcohol can cause feelings of anxiety.
- **Workplace factors** e.g. presenting at a meeting, imposter syndrome, not having strong connections with colleagues, a difficult relationship with someone at work.

## Step 4

Identify which situations cause you to feel anxious.  
Can you plot these on the scale?



# Saying 'Hello' to your Inner Critic

Anxiety is the worry about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Often this is about situations where we feel a lack of control and our imagination kicks in. A good way to understand this is to become conscious of that inner sceptic. What is your imagination saying to you (quite possibly about things going wrong)?

Some people find it helpful to give that inner voice an identity so that it is easier to be objective. The thoughts are not you. They are simply being generated by your amygdala to warn you to be aware. For example, 'I'm going to forget what I'm supposed to say', or 'they will think I'm useless.'

The critical point here is that you have a **choice** about whether you listen to your internal narrative, or you take control.

## Step 5

**What name/ identity will you give your inner critic? How will you remember each others'? Do you give permission for your colleagues to help you if they notice your amygdala making an appearance?**

## Step 6

**Identify what the thoughts are telling you. What are your core beliefs provoking your amygdala?**

## Step 7

**Decide if you want to challenge them, or, if you are ok with the misuse of your imagination and your experience of anxiety.**

If you decide to challenge (well done – you are building resilience):

- ✓ Find contrary evidence to the specific worry e.g. I didn't forget last time.
- ✓ Ask the question 'what's the worst that can happen?' (often the worst-case scenario isn't as bad as we believe) e.g. I forget and have to refer to my notes.
- ✓ Reframe e.g. if I forget, they will see I'm human, especially when I use humour (that I may have prepared in advance).

Another great reframe is to reappraise the anxiety to be excitement – you have a challenge to embrace that is part of your development and growth.

You can do this individually but it's really powerful when others help you to explore these points and provide an alternative perspective.

# Techniques to Manage your Anxiety

When you are feeling anxious, your body releases the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol. These are responsible for the symptoms you experience.

It is important you find ways to reduce your emotional arousal, to quieten your amygdala that is driving the fight-flight-freeze response, and to put your cognitive brain back in control.

Effective ways to bring down your emotional arousal include:

- **7:11 Breathing** Breathe in and out through your nose, from your diaphragm, and extend your out-breathe to activate your parasympathetic nervous system. For specific breathing exercises, check out this resource. [Breathing Exercises - It's Time for Change \(itstimeforchange.co.uk\)](https://www.itstimeforchange.co.uk/breathing-exercises-it-s-time-for-change)
- **Get active** Whether that's a brisk walk or more strenuous activity, find something you enjoy to reduce your levels of adrenaline and cortisol.
- **Distract** yourself by focusing on something else that is really engaging.
- **Say Hello** Recall the identity you gave your inner critic. Choose whether to get bossy, telling them to clear off, you've got this. Or whether you are someone who prefers to soothe and reassure it.
- **Change the feeling** Imagine the anxiety is a sensation that you can shift in your body, or that the thoughts come out of the radio on which you can turn down the volume, or that you imagine putting the anxiety in a hot air balloon and watch it float away into the distance. There are so many options!
- **Rehearsal** When you are feeling calm, close your eyes and imagine a successful run-through of the situation that has been causing feelings of anxiety. For example, delivering your presentation with confidence and clarity. Visualisation is a technique that sports people, actors and many successful people employ. It is particularly effective when you can recall the feelings from a past successful experience and transfer those to the new situation.

The **AWARE** method helps you accept the anxiety symptoms, to be patient (knowing they will pass), and to know how to behave. Acceptance reduces the ongoing release of stress hormones.

**Accept the anxiety.** Do not try to fight it. Sit with the experience.

**Watch the anxiety.** Observe without judgement – what are you noticing about it? Be detached (you are not the anxiety). Rate it from 1-10. Notice if it is on the way up or down.

**Act normally.** Keep doing what you intended to do and do not be tempted to escape as that reinforces the anxiety. Breathe normally (or use 7:11) and experience the anxiety fading.

**Repeat.** If the anxiety is not at an acceptable level, repeat the steps above. Be patient – you will experience the anxiety coming down soon.

**Expect the best.** Trust that you can get through this and that you will be ok. Focus on what you can take control of, not what might happen. Recall previous times you have coped with anxiety.

## Step 8

**Discuss your strategies for reducing anxiety.  
Which work well for you? Which new ones will you try?**

It is good practice to identify different strategies at each stage of the anxiety scale. That should include what you do at '0' to maintain the feeling of ease. It is important to spot the early signs of anxiety (1 and 2 on the scale) and to take action to maintain control (before your emotional responses begin dominating your logical thought).

Mark them on a collective team scale so that you can hold each other to account!

Agree how each person feels comfortable being made aware of their increasing emotional arousal (if they have not yet noticed), and being gently nudged to take action.



# Bringing the Conversation to a Close

*Step 9*

Revisit this conversation to review experience, beliefs and strategies at an agreed date.

*Step 10*

Give yourselves a team high-five for doing something meaningful that can help shape positive mental wellbeing. What's your next topic to discuss?



**Let's continue normalising the conversations that matter.**

For individual strategies to reduce anxiety, check out this [audio-blog](#).