What is anxiety?

Your body's alarm system, and what to do when it goes off too often.

Anxiety is the body's natural response to danger. It gets you ready to act: to fight, run, or freeze. That's useful when the danger is real. Problems start when the alarm goes off often, loudly, or when there's no real danger.

What anxiety can feel like

In your body

Racing heart, fast breathing, tight chest, upset stomach, sweating, dizziness, tense muscles.

In your mind

Worry, "what if..." thoughts, expecting the worst, trouble focusing, your mind going blank.

In what you do

Avoiding, escaping early, asking for reassurance, over-preparing, checking.

These sensations are uncomfortable, but not dangerous. **Anxiety rises, peaks, and settles on its own.**

The anxiety cycle

1. A trigger →
2. "What if...?" →
3. Anxiety in your body →
4. Avoid or escape →
5. Quick relief

↻ ...and next time, the anxiety comes back stronger.

Avoiding brings relief in the moment, but it teaches your brain that the situation really was dangerous. So the fear grows.

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Anxiety can take different forms

- Constant worry
- Panic attacks
- Social anxiety
- Health anxiety
- Specific fears and phobias
- Fear of flying or driving
- Exam and performance anxiety

What helps

Slow your breathing

Breathe in for 4, out for 6, for a few minutes. A longer out-breath tells your body it's safe. Use it to settle, not to escape the feeling.

Face it gradually

Approach what you've been avoiding, step by step. Stay long enough for the anxiety to settle a little.

Question the worry

Ask: How likely is this, really? What would I tell a friend? Could I cope if it happened?

Look after the basics

Regular sleep, movement, and less caffeine and alcohol all lower your body's baseline alarm.

When to get support

1. **Anxiety stops you** from doing things that matter: work, study, relationships, or going out.
2. **It lasts for weeks** or keeps coming back, even when life is calm.
3. **You have panic attacks** or avoid places because you're afraid of having one.
4. **You rely on reassurance** or on alcohol or other substances to cope.

Anxiety is very common, and very treatable.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for anxiety.

If you have new chest pain or physical symptoms you're unsure about, check with a doctor first. In an emergency in the Netherlands, call 112.

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