

# Mental health - Anxiety and stress

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Stress is something that we all feel at certain times, and it is a completely normal reaction to something external. A healthy amount of stress can help us to get things done and deal with the demands of everyday life.

Anxiety is our bodies response to stress and what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid, particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future. Sometimes we may feel worried about something that happened in the past.

What makes a person feel this way is very personal and may change as it can be caused by many factors.

## What happens when we are anxious?

Anxiety can cause many different symptoms. It might affect how a person feels physically, mentally, and how they behave. It's not always easy to recognize when stress or anxiety is the reason that someone is feeling or acting differently. Here are some of the things that a person might experience:

Physical	Mood	Behaviour
Fatigue	Irritability	Drinking more alcohol
Headaches	Ruminating	Poor appetite or overeating
Upset tummy	Restlessness	Social withdrawal
Sweating	Racing thoughts	Poor memory
Chest pain & rapid heartbeat	Overwhelmed	Word finding difficult
Low immune system	Tearful	Talking too fast

# What helps

There are things that we can all do that may reduce or prevent anxiety such as:

- Keeping active
- Eating healthily
- Having a good night's sleep
- Talking to someone
- Being present with our experience as it is now
- Recognizing what we are feeling

# Anxiety and people who have Down's syndrome

People who have Down's syndrome will experience stress and anxiety for the same reasons as anyone else. However, there may be additional factors inherent in the condition alongside environmental factors that contribute to a higher likelihood of stress and anxiety.

- Unfamiliar situations
- Lack of control
- Expectations too high or low
- Change/transition
- Not being understood
- Health issues
- Holidays
- Loss of a friend or family member
- Not having friends
- Waiting

# What helps people who have Down's syndrome

The following may minimize stress and anxiety. Each person will have individual needs, what works and what the person's needs will be different for everyone.

<b>Planning</b>  By planning ahead and identifying possible stressors we can look at what we might need to put in place, or remove, to help the person.	<b>Realistic expectations</b>  Tuning in to the person's emotional state will enable us to adjust expectations throughout the day. This might include breaking up tasks into smaller achievable parts or introducing more visual support.
<b>Managing change</b>  Putting strategies in place to support a person through big and small changes will help to reduce anxiety. We might prepare someone using visual supports (e.g., timetables) or through videos and stories.	<b>Time to Process</b>  Providing people with as much time as they need to process information, particular in new and different situations, may reduce anxiety.

<p><b>Supporting Choice</b></p> <p>Offering choice whenever possible is usually beneficial to well-being. There are times when limiting choice might lower anxiety.</p>	<p><b>Offering support</b></p> <p>Promoting independence is important. We need to recognize when someone needs support and empower them to request it by whatever means.</p>
<p><b>Recognizing Feelings</b></p> <p>It is important to provide ways and means for the person to express how they are feeling. This could include teaching a person what anxiety is, how it feels, and what they can do when it happens.</p>	<p><b>Noticing the Positive</b></p> <p>It is helpful to acknowledge when things have gone well and to highlight the positive experiences that happen in everyday life.</p>

## What might help when the person who has Down's syndrome is anxious

It is useful to build a toolbox of things in advance to use when a person becomes anxious. What helps will be personal and different for each person.

- Remove the cause of the anxiety if possible
- Taking slow deep breaths
- Going outside
- Moving
- Reassurance
- Use things that previously helped
- Ask what they need if appropriate

## When does anxiety become a disorder?

If anxiety is significantly disrupting someone's life most days and over the long-term (at least 6 months), then it may be that they have General Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

McGuire & Chicoine list several possible symptoms for GAD including:

- excessive anxiety and worry
- restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
- getting tired easily
- getting irritable
- finding concentration difficult
- tense muscles
- difficulty falling or staying asleep

## Seeking help

If you are still concerned after having put strategies in place to prevent/reduce anxiety and stress, then talk to a professional such as a paediatrician, GP or learning disability nurse.

We would always suggest a thorough health check-up to see if there are any underlying health issues that may have caused, or be contributing to, the changes you are seeing.

### **Community Learning Disability Team (CLDT)**

CLDTs have been set up to serve the health needs of adults who have learning disabilities. Your GP can make a referral to the CLDT on your behalf. Some CLDTs also take direct referrals from people who have learning disabilities, their families, or paid supporters.

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)**

CAMHS are the NHS services that assess and treat young people with emotional, behavioural and/or mental health difficulties. You can find your local service by searching online; the details are usually to be found on your local NHS Trust website. In some areas there may be a specialist learning disability CAMHS service.

## Book references

Chicoine, B &, McGuire, D (2021, 2nd Ed) Mental Wellness in Adults with Down's syndrome – A Guide to Emotional and Behavioral Strengths and Challenges (Woodbine House).

[This publication is now available free as a digital book.](#)

## DSA resources

Our emotional well-being resources are all available on our website. You will find the resource for supporters here:

[downs-syndrome.org.uk/about-downs-syndrome/health-and-wellbeing/emotional-wellbeing/](https://downs-syndrome.org.uk/about-downs-syndrome/health-and-wellbeing/emotional-wellbeing/)

For some people listening to a relaxation recording can help – our relaxation audio can be downloaded via the above link. It might be useful to try it out a few times before introducing it when someone is feeling anxious.

Our video about relaxing may also be helpful; it can be downloaded at the same link.

# CONTACT US

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