A Family Services Guide

What is Anxiety?

Understanding worry, fear, and anxiety disorders

Supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, unease, or fear. Everyone experiences anxiety at times – it is a normal human response and can even be helpful in genuinely risky situations.

Anxiety becomes a disorder when it is out of proportion to the situation, is hard to control, happens frequently, and starts to get in the way of everyday life, relationships, or learning.

What anxiety can look like

Physical

A racing heart, sweating, shaking, stomach aches, headaches, muscle tension, or feeling sick.

Cognitive

Persistent worry, racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating, or expecting the worst.

Behavioural

Avoidance of feared situations, seeking frequent reassurance, restlessness, or irritability.

In children in particular

Clinginess, tearfulness, meltdowns, sleep difficulties, or physical complaints such as stomach aches before school.

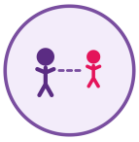
Common types of anxiety

Generalised anxiety

Persistent, excessive worry about a wide range of everyday things, rather than one specific trigger.

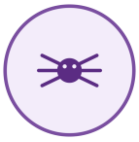
Social anxiety

Intense fear of social or performance situations, and of being judged, embarrassed, or scrutinised by others.



Separation anxiety

Excessive fear or distress about being away from a parent, carer, or attachment figure.



Specific phobias

Intense, persistent fear of a particular object or situation, such as insects, injections, or heights.

Panic disorder

Recurring, sudden episodes of intense fear (panic attacks), often with strong physical symptoms.

School-based / EBSA-related anxiety

Anxiety centred specifically around attending school (see our separate EBSA fact sheet).

Normal worry or an anxiety disorder?

- Occasional worry about a specific event (an exam, a new situation) is a normal part of life and usually settles once the event has passed.
- An anxiety disorder involves worry that is excessive relative to the situation, difficult to control, present on more days than not, and that has a genuine, ongoing impact on daily functioning.

> **The key distinction**
> It's the frequency, intensity, and impact of the anxiety – not simply feeling anxious sometimes – that distinguishes an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety and autism

A common overlap

Anxiety is one of the most common difficulties experienced alongside autism. Around 40% of autistic children and young people experience a diagnosable anxiety disorder, considerably higher than in the general child population, with specific phobias, OCD, and social anxiety among the most commonly reported.

This is thought to relate to a combination of factors, including sensory sensitivities, social and communication differences, a strong need for predictability, and the additional effort involved in navigating a world not designed with autistic needs in mind.

> **Why screening matters**
> Because anxiety and autism can present in overlapping ways, professionals recommend routinely screening for anxiety in autistic children and young people, rather than assuming distress is "just part of being autistic".

How to support someone with anxiety

Practical, everyday approaches

Small, consistent responses can make a real difference in how anxiety is managed day to day.

- **Take worries seriously, even if they seem out of proportion to you –** the fear and physical response are genuinely real to the person experiencing them
- Stay calm and reassuring, without dismissing or minimising the worry
- **Avoid excessive reassurance-seeking cycles –** constantly answering the same worry can unintentionally maintain anxiety; gently acknowledging the worry once, then redirecting, can be more helpful
- Support gradual, manageable steps towards a feared situation, rather than either avoiding it altogether or forcing a big jump
- **Use calming strategies together –** slow breathing, movement, or a quiet space can help in the moment
- Keep routines and expectations predictable where possible, as uncertainty often fuels anxiety
- Seek professional support (GP, school-based support, or CAMHS) if anxiety is frequent, intense, or affecting daily life, sleep, or school attendance

In the moment

Slow breathing, gentle movement, or a quiet space can help bring the body's stress response back down.

Remember

Anxiety is a genuine, common, and very treatable difficulty – not a sign of weakness or overreacting. With understanding, the right support, and sometimes professional input, children, young people, and adults with anxiety can and do learn to manage it well.