

Reference Guide

These resources support patients with accessible, psychoeducation about anxiety. The handouts bridge the gap between GP visits and psychological care, making them particularly valuable for patients on mental health care plans or awaiting mental health support.

NOTICING ANXIETY PATTERNS

Particularly helpful for patients who feel overwhelmed by their symptoms and need a structured framework to understand their experiences.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Beneficial for patients presenting with somatic symptoms or those who respond well to biological explanations of their anxiety.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR THOUGHT PATTERNS

Recommended for patients who get caught in worry cycles or identify as overthinkers.

UNDERSTANDING STRESS VS ANXIETY

Suitable for patients struggling to differentiate between work/life stress and anxiety symptoms, particularly high-functioning individuals.

UNDERSTANDING MEDICATION

Appropriate for patients considering medication options or expressing concerns about treatment choices. Guide to working together GP and Patient.

UNDERSTANDING SELF-MEDICATION

Useful for patients using alcohol, substances, or other coping mechanisms to manage their anxiety symptoms.

SUPPORTING OTHERS

Recommended when family members or carers need guidance on helpful versus unhelpful responses.

Noticing anxiety patterns

Is your anxiety running on autopilot?

Your mind and body are responding exactly as they're designed to. This resource helps you notice these responses, creating moments where different choices become possible.

Anxiety has kept humans safe for thousands of years. Today, this system turns on for everyday worries that are not actually dangerous.

When we notice our anxiety patterns - in our thoughts, body, brain and energy - we can step back from automatic reactions and choose how to respond.

NOTICING THOUGHTS

- Worries pop up quickly
- Small worries feel bigger
- You move away from difficulty
- You need to be completely sure

We create these thoughts, even if it does not feel like it. When we notice them happening, things naturally slow down, giving us space to choose..

NOTICING BODY SIGNALS

- Breathing changes
- Heart beating faster
- Body feels hot or cold
- Muscles get tight

Your body is doing exactly what it should to protect you. When you notice these signals, remember you are responding to something that feels unsafe, not something that is unsafe.

NOTICING BRAIN RESPONSES

- Tasks feel too big to handle
- Hard to focus
- Hard to get started
- Can't sit still

Your brain uses energy protecting you from danger. To save energy, it creates quick responses. When noticing this, you can pause and remind yourself that you are safe.

NOTICING SAFETY RESPONSES

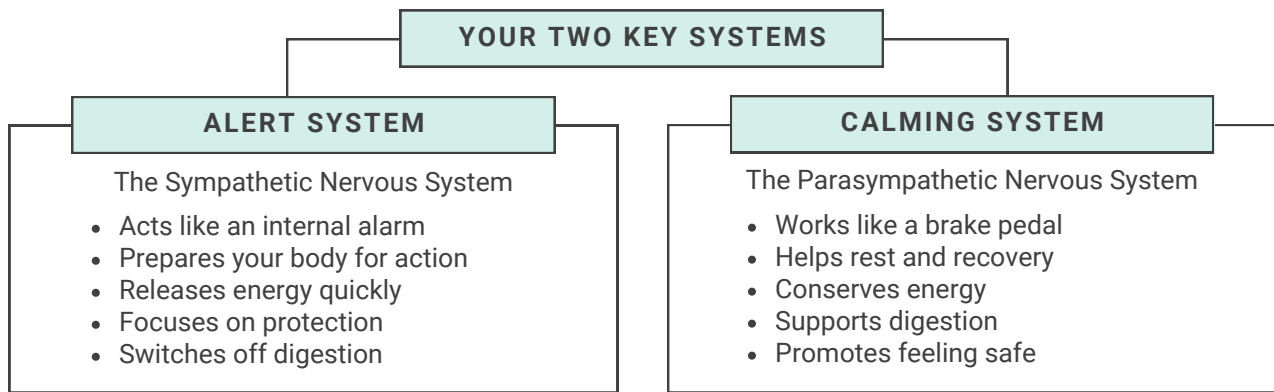
- Backing away from what worries you
- Checking things over and over
- Getting ready for the worse
- Pulling away from others

These patterns developed to help you feel safe. Noticing them helps you recognise when they're protecting you and when they're limiting your choices.

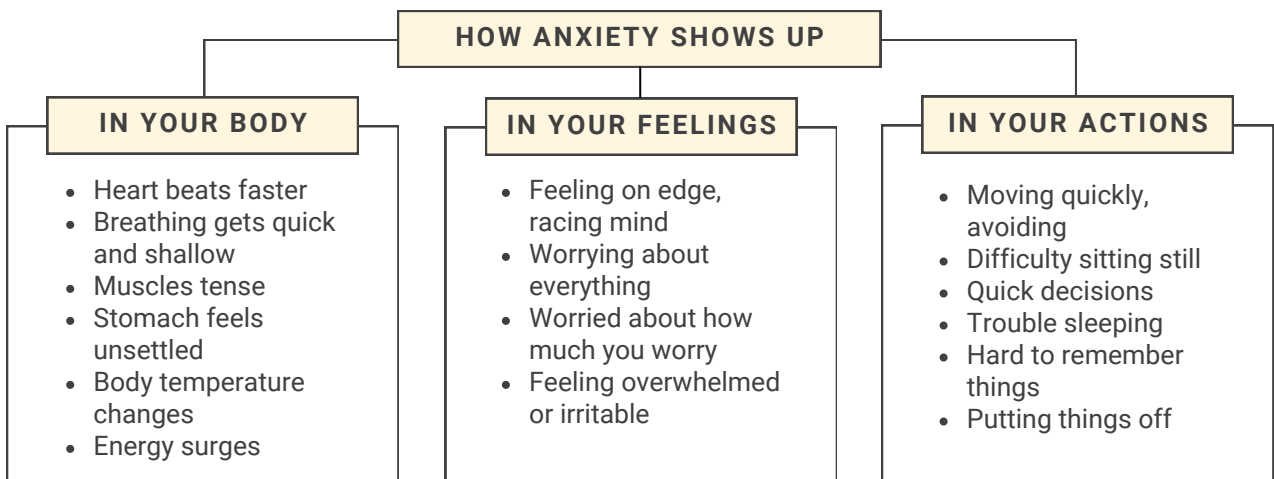
Next time you notice anxiety, **pause**. Take a moment to notice what is happening - in your thoughts, body, brain, or energy. This moment helps you choose what to do next.

Understanding your nervous system

Have you ever felt your heart racing before a big event or your stomach tightening when you are stressed? That is your nervous system doing its job. Understanding how this system works helps us recognise when it is being overprotective and how to help it find balance.



Your body naturally shifts between alert and calm, but anxiety can make it harder to dial down the alert system.



Anxiety is not a sign of weakness. Your system is doing what it is designed to do – we just need to teach it how to turn the volume down when the danger is not real.

THE CALM BUTTON

One of the main players in calming your nervous system is the vagus nerve. It connects your brain to your heart, lungs, and gut. When it is active, it helps you feel safe and settled. Simple things like slow breathing, humming, or gentle movement can stimulate the vagus nerve and support your calm system.

Understanding your thought patterns

Our minds create patterns to help us make sense of the world and stay safe. With anxiety, these thought patterns often become overprotective, making us see danger where there is not any. Understanding these patterns helps us notice when our thoughts are trying too hard to protect us

PROTECTIVE PATTERNS

- Expecting the worst
- Needing to be certain
- Mind reading others
- Overthinking everything
- Focusing only on risks
- Doubting your judgment

These patterns developed to keep you safe. Understanding where they came from helps us see when they are being overprotective.

THOUGHTS FEED ANXIETY

- Quick worries lead to more worries
- Avoiding feeds uncertainty
- Checking gives brief relief
- Relief makes you check more
- Overthinking drains energy
- Doubt grows stronger

Your brain uses these patterns because they worked once. When you notice them, you can pause and choose if they are still helpful.

COMMON TRAPS

- Trying to think your way out
- Fighting with your thoughts
- Searching for perfect answers
- Asking others to decide
- Waiting to feel ready
- Seeking constant reassurance

These responses are natural but often keep thought patterns going. Small steps forward are possible even with uncertain thoughts.

CHECK THE FACTS

F	A	C	T	S
Feelings getting in the way?	Actual evidence?	Catastrophizing?	Take others views?	Solutions possible?
What am I feeling right now? Are my emotions making things seem worse?	What facts do I have? What is my mind adding to the story?	Am I assuming the worst? What else might happen?	How might someone else see this? What would I tell a friend?	What can I do right now? What is the next small step?

Understanding stress vs anxiety

Your brain has a protective system that responds to both stress and anxiety.

While they can feel similar, understanding the difference helps you respond effectively.

STRESS

- Happens when facing specific challenges
- Usually clears when the situation passes
- Helps you take action when needed
- Links to actual events happening now

In your body

- Body feels tense or tired
- Mind feels busy or overwhelmed
- Sleep or appetite might change
- Might feel irritable or restless

Trigger

Clear cause (like deadlines)

Duration

Usually temporary

Impact

Manageable with support

What helps

- Break tasks into smaller steps
- Take regular breaks
- Use calming activities
- Talk to supportive people

ANXIETY

- Can happen without clear triggers
- Continues even when safe
- Makes it hard to feel calm
- Often focuses on future worries

In your body

- Racing heart or breathing
- Constant worry thoughts
- Avoiding situations
- Feeling on edge or unsafe

Trigger

Often unclear or future-based

Duration

Can continue for weeks/months

Impact

Can interfere with activities

What helps

- Learn about your brain's alert system
- Practice calming skills regularly
- Notice your anxiety patterns
- Consider professional support

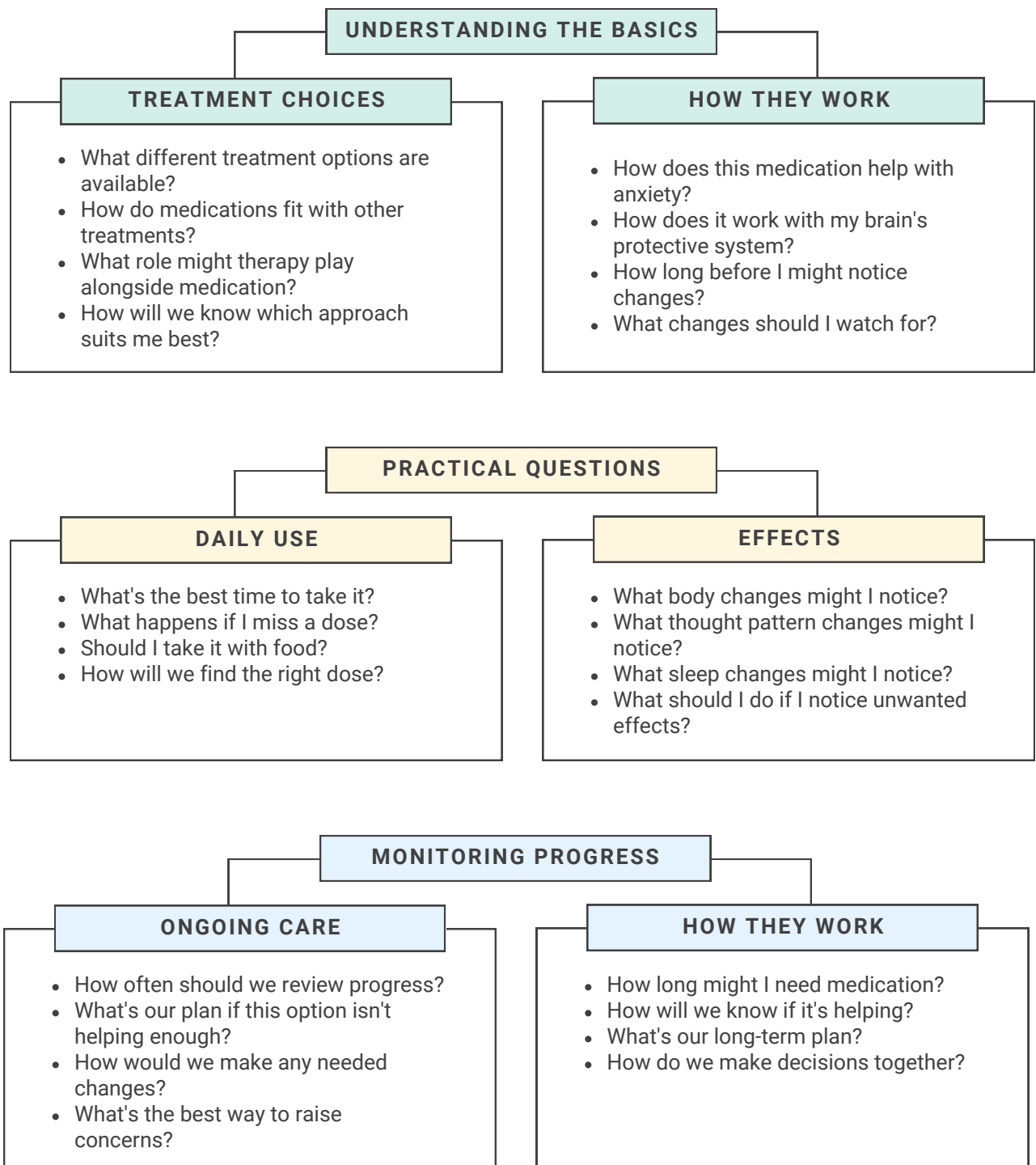
WHEN THEY OCCUR TOGETHER

- Recognise when stress will pass naturally
- Notice when anxiety is adding extra worry
- Respond to each part separately

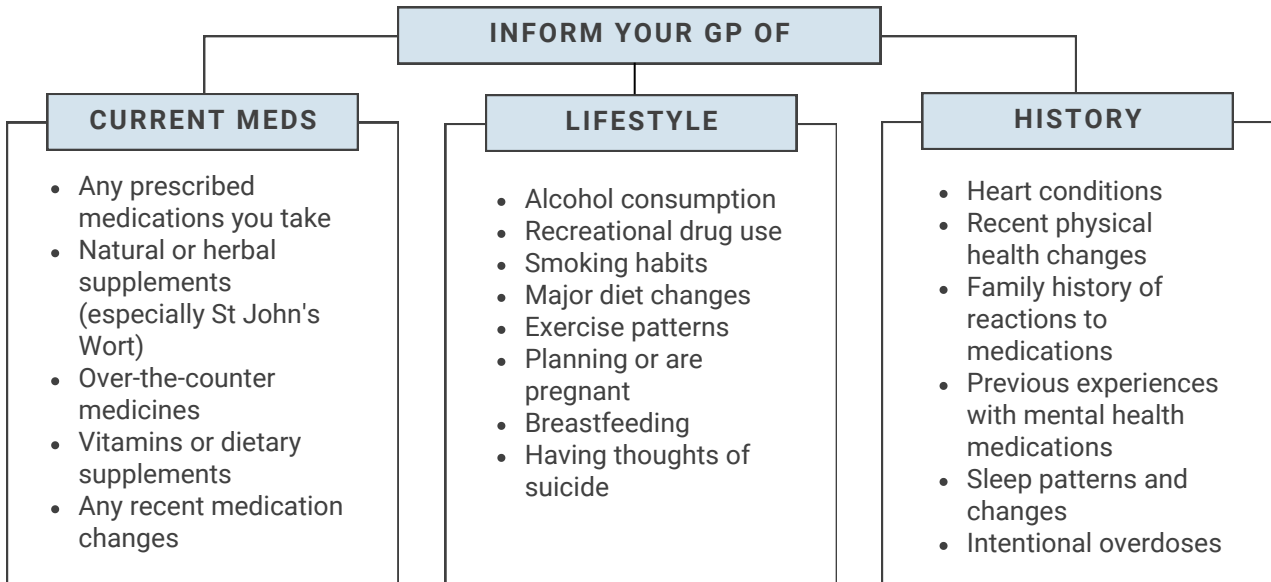
For example: When facing a work deadline (stress), anxiety might add extra layers of worry about your overall ability or future job security. While the deadline stress will pass, anxiety tries to protect you by scanning for every possible future problem.

Understanding anxiety medications

Being actively involved in your mental health care helps you make informed choices. These questions can guide conversations with your healthcare team



Understanding anxiety medications



Being open with your GP about your full health picture helps prevent unwanted effects and supports better treatment choices. Remember, your GP's role is to help you make informed decisions about your health, not to judge your choices. They have seen and heard it all before - their focus is on keeping you safe and supporting your wellbeing

RESOURCES			
Lifeline Crisis Support lifeline.org.au 13 11 14	Head to Health Information & Support headtohealth.gov.au	Black Dog Institute Information blackdoginstitute.org.au	Beyond Blue Information & Support beyondblue.org.au 1300 22 4636
TGA Information tga.gov.au 1800 020 653	ARCvic Helpline arcvic.org.au 1300 269 438	000 Emergency Care tiplezero.gov.au 000	AHPRA Complaints & Directory ahpra.gov.au 1300 419 495

- REMEMBER**
- There are no silly questions
 - Your experience matters
 - Regular reviews help adjust care
 - You are part of the decision-making team
 - Different approaches work for different people
 - Medication is only one treatment option

Understanding self-medication

We all have a space where life feels manageable and predictable. While this zone helps us feel safe, it can also keep us stuck in anxiety patterns. Moving forward means taking small steps beyond what feels familiar.

NOTICE WHEN REACHING FOR

- Alcohol to relax
- Cannabis to quiet thoughts
- Food for comfort
- Social media to escape
- Work to stay busy
- Shopping to feel better

These are common ways we try to feel better quickly. Noticing is not about judging - it is about understanding what we're trying to avoid feeling.

EXAMPLE PATTERNS

- Using these things to handle social situations
- Needing them more often
- Finding it hard to cope without them
- Planning life around having them handy

These patterns often develop slowly, helping us handle difficult feelings. Understanding their role helps us see what needs our attention.

THE CYCLE

- Quick relief feels good
- Anxiety comes back stronger
- Trust in handling anxiety naturally drops
- Need for quick fixes grows

What helps right now might make anxiety stronger over time. This isn't about blame - it is about seeing patterns that might not be helping anymore.

CREATING CHANGE

While these ways of coping helped you handle hard times, they might now be keeping anxiety going. Noticing these patterns helps us see when we are choosing quick relief over lasting change, creating space for different choices.

Supporting someone with anxiety

When someone we care about experiences anxiety, we naturally want to help. While support matters, understanding the balance between caring and taking over helps create room for real growth. Use this handout to start important conversations about support and boundaries..

HELPFUL CONVERSATIONS

- Ask "How can I support you?"
- Listen without fixing
- Notice their feelings without feeding fears
- See their strength in getting help
- Share care, not worry

Supporting someone means being there while they find their way. The most helpful conversations often start with just listening.

COMMON TRAPS

- Taking charge to stop their distress
- Giving constant reassurance
- Avoiding topics that might worry them
- Changing your behaviour to prevent their anxiety
- Taking on their comfort as your job

While these responses come from caring, they often keep anxiety patterns going rather than supporting growth.

HEALTHY LIMITS

- Be clear about what support you can give
- Keep your own routines
- Let them handle manageable challenges
- Respect their timing
- Look after yourself too

Setting limits is not mean - it helps both people stay well and keeps relationships strong.

CREATING CHANGE

Supporting someone with anxiety means finding balance between care and independence. While you can offer understanding and presence, remember their growth comes from their own steps forward. Your role is to support their journey, not to carry it for them.