

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.