

Coping with anxiety

Studies suggest that up to 50 per cent of people with epilepsy may also experience anxiety. Katherine McGrath and Liz Donnachie from Epilepsy Society's psychology department, share their strategies for reducing anxiety levels



Anxiety can affect everyone at some time in their lives. It is a normal response to a stressful situation or perceived threat and can cause feelings ranging from uneasiness to severe panic.

In the general population, as many as one in 10 people in the UK are estimated to be affected by anxiety. But for those with epilepsy, this figure is thought to be much higher and it is not surprising.

There are many causes of anxiety that affect everyone. Life events such as a family break up, bullying at school or work conflict can leave you vulnerable to anxiety. For some people an innate tendency to always expect the worst, puts them at a higher risk of anxiety. But for those with epilepsy, the unpredictable nature of seizures, the side effects of medications and the impact of the condition on lifestyle issues can also affect their self esteem and cause anxiety.

People with epilepsy often say that losing their driving licence due to uncontrolled seizures has one of the biggest impacts on their lives, affecting employment, social life and sense of freedom – all causes of anxiety. Issues around deciding whether or not to disclose their epilepsy, either in the workplace or personal and social relationships, can also contribute.

Alongside this, lack of public awareness of the condition, misunderstandings and stigma can heighten anxiety further.

**Assistant psychologists,
Liz Donnachie, left, and
Katherine McGrath**

But there are ways to reduce the impact. The following steps offer specific strategies to manage feelings of anxiety and help you to take more control. However it is important to remember that not all problems are within our reach. There is nothing to be achieved from worrying about something you have no control over.

Understanding more about anxiety

This can be a first step to helping you address your anxiety more objectively. Anxiety is a word we often use when we feel uptight, irritable, nervous or wound up. When we are anxious we often experience uncomfortable physical sensations which may include increased heart rate, muscular tension and sweating.

Anxiety can affect us mentally too. If we are anxious, we often worry for large periods of time, so that worries can feel out of control. Anxiety can also affect the way we behave, leading us to avoid doing things because we are concerned about how they will turn out.

Recognising that we are anxious, means we can find ways to tackle those feelings.

Challenging unhelpful thoughts

We are all prone to negative or unhelpful thinking at times. We may fear that others will judge us negatively – ‘if I have a seizure, they will think I’m useless’, ‘they won’t like me.’ The way we think about things can impact on our anxiety levels.

One effective strategy is to replace this type of thinking with realistic thinking. This means considering all aspects of a situation – the positive, the negative and the neutral – before drawing a conclusion. It means looking at yourself, others and the world in a balanced way.

Challenge any unhelpful thoughts with questions. Ask yourself:

- are you imagining the worst possible thing is about to happen
- are you making assumptions about what others might think
- are you confusing your own thoughts with facts
- what would you tell a friend if they had similar anxieties
- what is the worst that could happen

- if it did happen could you cope
- is there another way of looking at the situation
- how will you feel about this in six months time?

Testing your thoughts to make sure they are realistic and balanced, can help to reduce levels of anxiety.

Try coming up with some coping statements such as ‘if I become anxious, I will try some calm breathing’, ‘this happened before and I know how to handle it’, ‘my anxiety won’t last forever.’

Practice positive self statements. Be kind to yourself rather than critical.

‘The unpredictable nature of seizures, side effects of medication and the impact of epilepsy on lifestyle can cause anxiety’



Problem solving

Developing a structured way of tackling a problem may help you to feel less anxious.

Identify your problem and write it down. For example ‘my new anti-epileptic drug is making me feel sick’.

Come up with possible solutions. List ways to overcome your problem such as arranging an appointment with your GP or epilepsy specialist nurse, then choose the best solution from your list. If that doesn’t work out, you can always try another approach later.

Review the outcome of your solutions. If the problem still exists, don’t give up. Ask someone else if they have any ideas or advice.

Facing up to situations

At some point we are all guilty of avoiding situations that cause us difficulties, but this can often make the problem worse. The longer we avoid something, the more intimidating it can become.

By avoiding situations we deny ourselves the opportunity to prove that we can cope with them.

As a result our self confidence decreases and our anxiety increases.

For example, someone who worries about having a seizure in public, may avoid going out socially. This means they miss the chance to realise they can cope, and to discover that often, people will help and understand. They may miss the opportunity to enjoy a party or shopping trip, or just to meet friends.

By confronting difficult situations we can help to build up self esteem and reduce anxiety.

Limiting worrying time

Cutting back on the amount of time you spend worrying can help to reduce anxiety. One way you can do this is to set aside a 15-20 minute worry time each day. If worries occur at other times, jot them down on a piece of paper and only tackle them during your worry time.

Try to resolve your worries but remain realistic. Some worries are outside of our control. You may even find that by the time you reach your worry time, problems from earlier in the day may have resolved themselves.

Relaxation

Relaxation calms the body and mind and helps to reduce anxiety levels. Without taking time out to unwind it is easy to feel overwhelmed and stressed.

You might like to relax by doing something you enjoy such as exercise, reading, listening to music, watching television, painting or visiting family and friends. Or you might like to unwind by just being by yourself. It is important to choose something you will look forward to doing.

Calm breathing

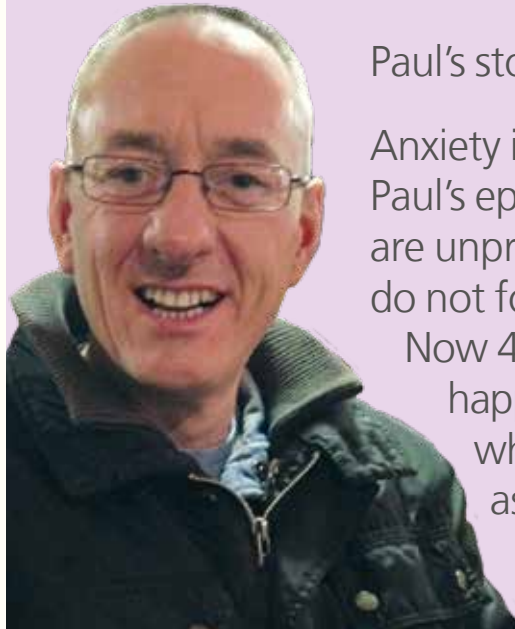
This is a technique that may help you calm down your breathing when feeling stressed or anxious. Our breathing changes when we feel anxious. We tend to take short, quick, shallow breaths and can even hyperventilate. This is called over-breathing and can actually make you feel more anxious or even cause a seizure.

Calm breathing involves taking smooth, slow and regular breaths. This is usually best done sitting upright as it increases the capacity of your lungs to fill with air. There are five steps:

- take a slow, deep breath through the nose for about four seconds
- hold your breath for one to two seconds
- exhale slowly through the mouth for about four seconds
- wait a few seconds before taking another breath
- repeat this action for a few minutes, completing six to eight breathing cycles.

Try calm breathing for at least five minutes, twice a day.

It is a good idea to try and incorporate these strategies as part of your daily routine, but do be patient and give them a chance to work. If, however, you are still feeling anxious it would be good to discuss other treatment options with your GP or epilepsy specialist nurse.



Paul's story

Anxiety is a large part of Paul's epilepsy. His seizures are unpredictable and do not follow a pattern.

Now 47, his first seizure happened at the age of 28 when he was working as an AA mechanic.

'I was called out to the roadside to change a tyre for a lady. While I was there I began to behave strangely, smacking my lips and making strange noises. I was in a trance. The lady was very frightened and feared I was going to attack her. She locked herself inside her car and called for help.

I was shocked when I learned what had happened, and the thought that I had frightened one of our customers was awful. It really knocked my confidence.

Another time I had gone to catch a bus but wandered into a local WeightWatchers class and made myself a cup of tea. I wandered around the building where the class was being held, totally unaware of what I was doing.

More recently during a computer literacy course I had a seizure and removed some of my clothes. I folded them up and placed them on a chair. There was only myself and the tutor in the room, and again she was frightened. I wrote her a letter of apology explaining

about my epilepsy. She accepted this but my course was terminated and I was asked to stay away from the building.

I am so embarrassed and anxious about how I might behave during a seizure, particularly the fear that I might remove my clothes. This is not at all how I would act normally and it really distresses me to think I might cause anyone to be afraid.

My epilepsy also gives me memory problems and this can make me feel even more anxious. My partner will sometimes ask me to get something from the shops and I will come back without the items. This then causes friction between us and we start raising our voices which causes me more anxiety. My self esteem can be really low.

I have attended several group therapy sessions looking at ways of managing and reducing my anxiety levels. It really helps to talk about it and to learn coping mechanisms so that my seizures don't dominate my life.'

Epilepsy Society's clinical psychologist Cheryl McKay will be talking about anxiety and depression at our annual conference on 27 September 2014. For more details see page 23.