

# Anxiety disorders

This factsheet gives information on anxiety disorders, how they are diagnosed, possible causes and treatments. It can help carers, friends or relatives of someone with an anxiety disorder.



- There are different types of anxiety disorders.
- Anxiety disorders can make you feel worried, panicked and fearful.
- Anxiety can cause physical symptoms such as a fast heartbeat, shaking and sweating.
- Your doctor will offer you treatment depending on your symptoms and how severe they are.

## This factsheet covers:

1. [What are anxiety disorders?](#)
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4. [How are anxiety disorders treated?](#)
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## 1. What are anxiety disorders?

We all experience occasional feelings of anxiety, worry and fear. These can be normal responses to certain situations. For example, you might worry about an upcoming interview for a job, or that you are able to pay a bill on time. If you are in a difficult or dangerous situation, these feelings can give you an awareness of the risks and what you need to do.

If you have an anxiety disorder, these feelings are more noticeable and difficult to live with. They can make you feel as though things are worse than they actually are. This can lead to you worrying all or most of the time and can affect your day to day life.

Symptoms of anxiety include:

- feelings of dread, panic or 'impending doom',
- feeling on edge or irritable,
- heightened alertness,
- difficulties sleeping,
- changes in appetite,
- difficulties concentrating,
- depersonalisation, and
- wanting to escape from the situation you are in.

You might also experience physical symptoms, which can include:

- sweating,
- heavy and fast breathing,
- hot flushes or blushing,
- dry mouth,
- shaking,
- hair loss,
- fast heartbeat,
- dizziness and fainting, and
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), stomach aches and sickness.

## Ali's story

Both getting to sleep and getting up in the morning is difficult for me. I have a constant sense of dread that is tough to ignore. My mind never switches off. It's exhausting.

Things like going to work or even doing the weekly shop became so tricky that I decided to speak to my GP. I'm now waiting for talking therapy.

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## 2. What are the different types of anxiety disorder and how are they diagnosed?

There are different types of anxiety disorders. The following sections go into more detail for each condition.

- [Agoraphobia](#)
- [Body dysmorphic disorder \(BDD\)](#)
- [Generalised anxiety disorder \(GAD\)](#)
- [Hair pulling \(Trichotillomania\)](#)
- [Obsessive compulsive disorder \(OCD\)](#)
- [Panic disorder \(panic attacks\)](#)
- [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)
- [Skin picking](#)
- [Social anxiety disorder](#)
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### Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is an anxiety disorder where you have an intense fear of certain situations, including:

- leaving your home,
- being in public spaces,
- using public transport, and
- being in crowded spaces

You might find that these situations make you feel distressed, panicked and anxious. You may avoid some situations altogether. This can affect your day-to-day life.

Agoraphobia can make it difficult to make an appointment with your GP to talk about your symptoms. You might not feel able to leave your house or go to the GP surgery. You can arrange a telephone appointment if you have symptoms of agoraphobia. A GP will make a diagnosis by asking you

questions about your symptoms. You may need further assessment from a psychiatrist for to get a formal diagnosis.<sup>1</sup>

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### **Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD)**

If you have body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), you will worry a lot about how you look or a particular part of your body. Although other people may not notice or see it the same way, it will make you feel distressed. You may think you have an odd body shape compared to other people or that a scar makes you look unattractive. BDD is not the same as being vain or self-obsessed.

BDD can make you do things that take up a lot of time.

- Staring at your face or body in the mirror
- Comparing your features with other people's
- Covering yourself excessively with makeup
- Considering plastic surgery when you do not need it

BDD can lead to depression. Some people with BDD have suicidal thoughts or feelings.

If you think you have BDD, you should speak to your GP. If they feel you have BDD, then they should discuss treatment options with you. The GP may arrange for a mental health worker who is experienced in BDD to help you.<sup>2</sup>

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### **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)**

If you have generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), you feel anxious a lot of the time. This may feel out of your control. You might feel 'on edge' and alert to your surroundings.

This can affect your day-to-day life. You might find that it affects your ability to work, travel places or even leave the house. You might also get tired easily or have trouble sleeping or concentrating. You might experience physical symptoms, including :

- muscle tension,
- headaches,
- sweating,
- nausea,
- 'butterflies' in your stomach, and
- a fear of fainting.<sup>3</sup>

It is common to have other conditions such as depression or other anxiety disorders if you have GAD.<sup>4</sup>

GAD can be difficult to diagnose because it does not have some of the obvious symptoms of other anxiety disorders. Your doctor is likely to say you have GAD if you have felt anxious for most days over six months.<sup>5</sup>

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### **Hair pulling (Trichotillomania)**

Hair pulling is a condition where you feel the urge to pull out your hair. This can be from your scalp or other places such as your arms, eyelashes, legs or pubic area. You will find it difficult to stop yourself doing this. It is linked to obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).<sup>6</sup>

You might experience a build-up of tension, which you can relieve by pulling out the strand of hair. You might not even be aware that you're doing it.

It can be difficult to stop, which can lead to hair loss. This in turn can make you feel guilty, embarrassed and affect how you feel about yourself or how your friends and family see you.

Your GP will look at the following to diagnose your condition:

- You repeatedly pull your hair out, causing noticeable hair loss
- You feel increasing tension before you pull your hair out
- You feel relief or pleasure when you have pulled your hair out
- There are no underlying illnesses, such as a skin condition, causing you to pull your hair out
- Pulling your hair out affects your everyday life or causes you distress<sup>7</sup>

If you are concerned about your appearance, you could arrange a wig from the NHS.<sup>8</sup>

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### **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**

An obsession is an unwelcome thought or image that repeatedly enters your mind and is largely out of your control. These can be difficult to ignore. You may not want these thoughts and they can be disturbing, which can make you feel distressed and anxious.

Compulsions are things you think about or do repeatedly to relieve the anxiety from your obsessive thoughts.

You might believe that you or someone close to you might come to harm if you do not do these things. You may realise that your thinking and behaviour is not logical but still find it very difficult to stop.

There are different types of OCD, which include:

- Contamination
- Checking
- Intrusive thoughts
- Hoarding

When you first see a healthcare professional like a GP about your symptoms, he or she will ask you about them. This helps them to find out if you have OCD, how severe your symptoms are and what treatment will be best for you.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Panic disorder (panic attacks)**

A panic attack makes you feel anxious and frightened. It happens suddenly and feels intense. You also have physical symptoms. These can include the following.

- An overwhelming sense of dread or fear
- Chest pain and/or a sensation that your heart is beating irregularly
- Feeling that you might be dying or having a heart attack
- Sweating and hot flushes or chills and shivering
- A dry mouth, shortness of breath or choking sensation
- Nausea, dizziness and feeling faint
- Numbness, pins and needles or a tingling sensation in your fingers
- A need to go to the toilet
- A churning stomach
- Ringing in your ears.<sup>10</sup>

It can be common for people having panic attacks to experience a sense of detachment from who they are. This is known as depersonalisation. It is thought that this may be the mind's way of dealing with the intense sensations associated with panic attacks.

For some people, certain situations cause panic attacks. For example, if someone has a fear of small spaces and has to board a plane, they may have a panic attack then.

Panic attacks can be linked to a variety of different anxiety disorders. Panic disorder is where you have regular panic attacks and there is no particular trigger. This can make you worry about when you might have another attack. If this happens, you may get a diagnosis of panic disorder.<sup>11</sup>

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## **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

You can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) if you experience a traumatic or frightening event. It can develop shortly after the event, or sometimes months or years later. Types of situations that can cause PTSD include:

- being a victim of serious violent crime or sexual assault,
- being subjected to prolonged sexual abuse, violence or severe neglect,
- witnessing a death or a violent attack on someone else,
- being involved in military combat,
- situations working for the emergency services,
- surviving a severe accident, such as a road traffic accident,
- being held hostage, and
- experiencing natural disasters, such as an earthquake.

PTSD causes feelings of intense fear, helplessness and horror. You can have panic attacks, nightmares and flashbacks (seeing images or visions of the past event in your mind).

You may find it very difficult to relax. This can lead to problems with sleep, concentration and anger management.

People with PTSD often avoid places, people, conversations or experiences which remind them of the trauma. This can become very isolating and can lead to emotional numbing.<sup>12</sup>

To get a diagnosis of PTSD, you will usually have to show symptoms for more than a month. You may feel less able to socialise, work or carry out everyday activities.<sup>13</sup>

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## **Skin-picking**

Skin-picking is a condition where you will repetitively pick at your skin. This can cause damage to your skin, including bleeding, bruising and sometimes permanent marks. You will usually pick the skin on your face, but might also pick other areas of the body. You will find it difficult to stop yourself doing it.

It seems that skin-picking can relieve tension and stress. However, often the relief is short-lived, and you will feel the urge to continue picking. You may not be aware that you are doing it.

Because skin-picking leaves visible marks, you might go to lengths to hide these using makeup or clothing.

Your GP may arrange for you to see a specialist mental health doctor like a psychiatrist for diagnosis.<sup>14</sup>

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### **Social anxiety disorder**

Social anxiety disorder (sometimes known as social phobia), means you will have an intense fear or dread of social or performance situations.

Some common situations where you may experience anxiety are:

- Speaking in public or in groups
- Meeting new people or strangers
- Dating
- Eating or drinking in public

You will be worried that you will do something or act in a way that is embarrassing or humiliating.

You might feel very aware of the physical signs of your anxiety. This can include sweating, a fast heartbeat, a shaky voice and blushing. You may worry that others will notice this or judge you. As a result you might find that you try to avoid such situations completely. You might realise that your fears are excessive, but will find it difficult to control them.

Your GP will ask you questions about your symptoms, and might ask you to fill out a questionnaire. This will help them find out what how anxious you feel in social situations.<sup>15</sup>

If you feel that it would be difficult to visit your GP, you can ask for a telephone appointment.

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### **Toilet anxiety**

This is a fear of using toilets in either your own home, someone else's home or in public spaces. This can lead to difficulty and embarrassment when needing to use the toilet.

You may:

- fear that other people can hear you using the toilet,
- worry about the cleanliness of the toilet, or
- worry about being able to use the toilet at all.

Anxiety UK runs a special project on toilet anxiety. You can find their contact details at the end of this factsheet.

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## **3. What causes anxiety disorders?**

We do not fully understand what causes anxiety disorders. Difficult events such as being bullied at school or seeing something traumatic can start some anxiety disorders. Brain chemicals and your environment can also cause anxiety.<sup>16</sup>

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#### **4. How are anxiety disorders treated?**

Your doctor will offer you treatment depending on your particular symptoms and diagnosis. They should fully involve you in this decision.

The NHS uses talking therapy and medication to treat anxiety disorders.

##### **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

CBT helps you understand the links between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It can help you to find ways to overcome your anxiety by challenging negative thoughts and beliefs.

##### **Exposure and response prevention (ERP)**

This is effective for a range of anxiety disorders, particularly OCD. Your therapist will encourage you to experience your obsessive thoughts without giving in to compulsive behaviour. They will gradually build up the difficulty of each task.<sup>17</sup>

##### **Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)**

Are used to treat anxiety disorders including generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

##### **Benzodiazepines**

Doctors will only prescribe benzodiazepines if your anxiety is extreme or if you are in crisis. This is because they are addictive and they may become less effective over time.

##### **Beta-blockers**

These can help with the physical signs of anxiety. They can help to lower a fast heartbeat, shaking or blushing.

##### **Complementary therapies**

Complementary therapies are treatments that are not part of mainstream medical care. Some people find them useful for helping with symptoms of anxiety. They can include things like mindfulness, yoga and hypnotherapy.

Anxiety can cause you to breathe badly or hyperventilate. Deep breathing techniques can help to overcome feelings of anxiety or panic attacks. Activities such as yoga, pilates and mindfulness meditation use breathing to help relaxation.

Go to [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) for information on these topics.

- Talking Therapies
- Antidepressants
- Benzodiazepines
- Complementary Therapies

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

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## 5. What treatment should I be offered?

There are different factors that your doctor will take into account when deciding your treatment.

- Your diagnosis and symptoms
- What options you have tried already
- What you want
- Any other conditions you have
- Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

NICE produces guidance for the NHS on how to treat anxiety disorders. Their guidance depends on diagnosis. They have guidance on:

- anxiety (which includes generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) and panic disorder),
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), and
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

You can download NICE guidance for free from [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk) or contact NICE publications on 0845 003 7783 for paper copies. NICE has written copies of these guidelines specifically for patients and carers.

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## 6. What if I am not happy with my treatment?

If you are not happy with your care or treatment, or feel that the relationship between yourself and a professional is not working well, you can try the following options.

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS can try to resolve problems or answer your questions. You can find your local PALS' details at [www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-\(PALS\)/LocationSearch/363](http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Patient-advice-and-liaison-services-(PALS)/LocationSearch/363).

## Advocacy

Advocacy can help you understand the mental health system and enable you to be fully involved in decisions about your care.

An advocate is someone independent from mental health services who can help to make your voice heard when you are trying to resolve problems. They may be able to help with writing letters for you or attending appointments or meetings.

You can find more information in our '**Advocacy**' factsheet, which you can download for free from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy..

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## 7. What are self care and management styles?

You can learn to manage your symptoms by looking after your self care. Self care is how you take care of your diet, exercise, daily routine, relationships and how you are feeling. You will learn how to notice when you are becoming unwell and know what your triggers are

## Supported self help

You will learn techniques to manage feelings of panic or phobia from books or computer programs. This therapy can be very helpful if you find it difficult to leave the house or talk to others.

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## 8. What risks and complications can anxiety disorders cause?

Having an anxiety disorder can cause longer-term problems.

- Difficulties sleeping
- Problems with having sex
- Feeling less able to work, socialise or enjoy everyday life
- Taking drugs or drinking alcohol

If you are worried about your anxiety and are not getting any help at the moment, then it is best to speak to your GP.

You can find more information in our factsheet '**What to expect from your GP**' which you can download for free from [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org). Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.

You may also find it helpful to speak to one of the organisations listed in our useful contacts section.

## 9. Information for carers, friends and relatives

It is important to seek support if are struggling to cope. Check whether there are any local support groups you can go to. If you feel you need additional support to care for your loved one, ask for a carer's assessment from your local authority.

If your loved one is supported by a mental health team and you are their carer, you should be involved with decisions about care planning. But there are rules about confidentiality that might make this difficult. Unless the person you care for consents, the team will not share confidential information about them with you. The team should ask your loved one for consent to share information with you.

Go to [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) for information on these topics.

- Carer's assessment and support planning
- Confidentiality and information sharing
- Supporting someone with a mental illness

Or call 0121 522 7007 and ask us to send you a copy.



### **Anxiety UK**

A user led organisation that supports anyone with anxiety, phobias, panic attacks or other anxiety related disorders. They can be contacted at:

**Telephone:** 08444 775 774 or 0161 227 9898 (Monday to Friday 9.30am–5.30pm)

**Address:** Anxiety UK, Zion Community Resource Centre, 339 Stretford Road, Hulme, Manchester. M15 4ZY

**Email:** [info@anxietyuk.org.uk](mailto:info@anxietyuk.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

### **Anxiety Alliance**

A charity dedicated to helping those suffering from anxiety.

**Telephone:** 0845 2967877 (open 10am-10pm daily)

**Address:** 26 Tannery Court, Bertie Road, Kenilworth, Warwickshire, CV8 1QY

**Email:** [harris835@btinternet.com](mailto:harris835@btinternet.com)

**Website:** [www.anxietyalliance.org.uk](http://www.anxietyalliance.org.uk)

### **SASH (London Social Anxiety Self-Help Groups)**

Run groups across the London area.

**Email:** [info@sashgroup.org](mailto:info@sashgroup.org)

**Website:** [www.sashgroup.org](http://www.sashgroup.org)

**Social Anxiety UK**

Offers support with social anxiety disorder. They are a web-based organisation and offer forums, a chatroom and information on the condition.

**Email:** [contact@social-anxiety.org.uk](mailto:contact@social-anxiety.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.social-anxiety.org.uk](http://www.social-anxiety.org.uk)

**OCD-UK**

Gives information, advice and support on obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and related disorders such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), skin-picking and hair pulling.

**Telephone:** 0345 120 3778 or 0845 120 3778.

**Address:** OCD-UK, Silverlands Lodge, Boarshead, Crowborough, East Sussex, TN6 3HE

**Email:** [support@ocduk.org](mailto:support@ocduk.org)

**Website:** [www.ocduk.org](http://www.ocduk.org)

**Combat Stress**

Offers support for veterans who have been involved in military combat and have symptoms of PTSD.

**Telephone:** 0800 138 1619

**Address:** Combat Stress, Tyrwhitt House, Oaklawn Road, Leatherhead, Surrey. KT22 0BX

**Email:** [contactus@combatstress.org.uk](mailto:contactus@combatstress.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.combatstress.org.uk](http://www.combatstress.org.uk)

**No Panic**

Offers emotional support and information on anxiety disorders and medication including tranquilizers.

**Telephone:** 0844 967 4848 (Everyday 10:00am - 10:00pm, Service Charge: 5p a minute)  
Youth Helpline 01753 840393 (For 13 to 20 year olds, open 4pm to 6pm Monday to Friday)

**Email:** [admin@nopic.org.uk](mailto:admin@nopic.org.uk)

**Website:** [www.nopic.org.uk](http://www.nopic.org.uk)



- <sup>1</sup> NHS Choices. *Agoraphobia diagnosis*  
[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Agoraphobia/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Agoraphobia/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx) (Accessed Nov 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2005) Core interventions in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder and body dysmorphic disorder. CG31. London.
- <sup>3</sup> NHS Choices. *Anxiety symptoms*  
[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Symptoms.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Symptoms.aspx) (Accessed Nov 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2007) Generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder (with or without agoraphobia) in adults: Management in primary, secondary and community care. CG113. London
- <sup>5</sup> NHS Choices. *Anxiety diagnosis*  
[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx) (Accessed Nov 2015)
- <sup>6</sup> OCD-UK. *Trichotillomania* [www.ocduk.org/trichotillomania](http://www.ocduk.org/trichotillomania) (Accessed Nov 2015)
- <sup>7</sup> NHS Choices. *Trichotillomania diagnosis*  
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- <sup>8</sup> NHS Choices. *Trichotillomania treatment*  
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- <sup>9</sup> See reference 2
- <sup>10</sup> NHS Choices. *Panic disorder*  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/Panic-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Panic-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx)  
(Accessed Nov 2015)
- <sup>11</sup> See reference 9
- <sup>12</sup> NHS Choices, Post traumatic stress disorder  
[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Post-traumatic-stress-disorder/Pages/Symptoms.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Post-traumatic-stress-disorder/Pages/Symptoms.aspx) (Accessed Nov 2015)
- <sup>13</sup> National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2005) The management of PTSD in adults and children in primary and secondary care. CG26. London.
- <sup>14</sup> See reference 12
- <sup>15</sup> NHS Choices. *Social anxiety disorder*  
<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-anxiety/Pages/Social-anxiety.aspx>  
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- <sup>16</sup> NHS Choices. *Anxiety causes*  
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Causes.aspx> (Accessed Oct 2013)
- <sup>17</sup> [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Obsessive-compulsive-disorder/Pages/Treatment.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Obsessive-compulsive-disorder/Pages/Treatment.aspx)

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This factsheet is available  
in large print.



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## Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927  
Monday to Friday, 10am to 2pm

Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

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### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

### or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

Feedback  
PO Box 68795  
London SE1 4PN

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 10am to 2pm, Monday to Friday.



Leading the way to a better  
quality of life for everyone  
affected by severe mental illness.

For further information  
on Rethink Mental Illness  
Phone 0121 522 7007  
Email [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)



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[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

### Need more help?

Go to [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org) for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

### Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

### Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 10am and 2pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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