



**Anxiety is not a sign of weakness. It is the brain doing its job - just a little too well.**

Most of us know what anxiety feels like. The tightening in the chest. The mind that won't stop. The sense that something is wrong, even when nothing specific is.

In later life, anxiety is one of the most common, and most underdiagnosed, mental health experiences. Yet it is rarely talked about.

This factsheet is about understanding what anxiety actually is, why it shows up more in later life, and what genuinely helps.

### What is anxiety, really?

Anxiety is your brain's threat-detection system firing up.

When we perceive danger, real or imagined, a part of the brain called the amygdala triggers the release of cortisol and adrenaline. Heart rate rises. Breathing quickens. Muscles tense. The body prepares to fight or flee.

This is a brilliant survival system. The problem is that the brain cannot always tell the difference between a physical threat and a worried thought. So it responds to 'What if something goes wrong?' with the same urgency it would to a genuine emergency.

### Anxiety in Later Life - The Numbers

3.4 millions people in Australia live with an anxiety condition<sup>1</sup>. Only 35.1% of people aged 65-85 years with anxiety seek support from a mental health professional.

Anxiety is not a young person's condition. It simply looks different as we age, and is more easily missed, by others, and by ourselves.

### What Tends to Trigger Anxiety in Later Life

Common Triggers	What it Can Look Like
Health concerns	Constantly checking symptoms, avoiding doctors, or fearing the worst
Loss & grief	Worry about the future after losing a partner, friend, or sense of role
Financial uncertainty	Persistent preoccupation with money, even when things are stable
Change & uncertainty	Dread around decisions, new situations, or things outside our control
Social situations	Avoiding gatherings, dreading conversations, or feeling 'on show'
Declining independence	Fear of being a burden, losing the ability to drive or live alone

## What the Brain Actually Needs

When anxiety rises, the nervous system needs signals of safety, not reassurance that everything is fine, but genuine physiological cues that the threat has passed.

These are some of the most effective, evidence-based approaches:

### In the Moment

- **Slow your breathing.** Breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 2, breathe out for 6. The longer exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system, your body's natural calm response.
- **Name what you're feeling.** Research shows that simply labelling an emotion e.g. 'I am feeling anxious' reduces its intensity. It moves the brain out of alarm mode and into clearer, calmer thinking.
- **Ground yourself physically.** Feel your feet on the floor. Hold something cool. Notice five things you can see. This brings the brain back into the present moment.
- **Move your body.** Even a short walk can metabolise the cortisol and adrenaline that anxiety produces.

### Over Time

- **Limit the news cycle.** Constant exposure to threatening information keeps cortisol elevated. Set a time limit on news consumption.
- **Maintain routine.** Predictability reduces anxiety. Regular mealtimes, sleep patterns, and social contact all signal safety to the nervous system.
- **Stay connected.** Isolation amplifies anxiety. Even a brief conversation with someone you trust can lower stress hormones measurably.
- **Reduce caffeine and alcohol.** Both significantly worsen anxiety, caffeine mimics the physical symptoms, alcohol disrupts the neurochemistry.
- **Talk to someone.** Anxiety thrives in silence. Naming it to a trusted person reduces its power considerably.

## A Word About Worry

Worry and anxiety are not the same thing, though they often travel together.

Worry is the thinking part, the 'what ifs' that loop through our minds. Anxiety is the physical experience in the body.

**One of the most useful things to ask when you notice worry is:  
Is this something I can do something about right now?**

### If, yes

Take one small action. Even a tiny step reduces the sense of helplessness that feeds anxiety.

*Write it down. Make the call. Ask for help*

### If, no

Practise letting it go, not by forcing it away, but by gently redirecting attention to what is in front of you right now.

*This is the foundation of mindfulness - and it can be learned at any age.*

## Anxiety and Your Club

Anxiety can quietly change how people show up in club life.

A member who becomes irritable, withdraws from meetings, avoids taking on roles, or seems permanently on edge may be carrying more than is visible on the surface.

Clubs that create a culture of genuine openness, where it is safe to say *'I'm not doing that well at the moment'* can be profoundly protective for their members.

You don't need to be a counsellor. You just need to notice, and ask.

### A Moment to Reflect

Do you recognise anxiety in yourself - even if you haven't always called it that?

Is there a worry you keep returning to?

Is it something you can act on, or something to practise letting go of?

Is there someone in your club who might be struggling quietly right now?

*You don't have to have all the answers. Sometimes the most powerful thing is simply being willing to notice.*



### When to Talk to Your Doctor

Self-help strategies are valuable, but some anxiety needs professional support. Please speak with your GP if:

- Anxiety is interfering with daily life, sleep, or relationships
- You are avoiding activities or places you used to enjoy
- You are using alcohol or other substances to cope
- You feel persistently on edge, fearful, or unable to relax

**Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 | Lifeline: 13 11 14**



1. <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/mental-health/statistics>

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Created in Partnership with Andrew Fuller - Clinical Psychologist, Family Therapist & Author [andrewfuller.com.au](http://andrewfuller.com.au)

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