



Cheshire and Wirral Partnership
NHS Foundation Trust



Understanding Autism

Session 3

Understanding ASD anxiety

What we are going to cover:

ASD and anxiety

What is anxiety

The anxiety circle

Management/Treatment of anxiety

Avoidance

Challenging negative thoughts

Relaxation Techniques

***A lot of our material has been obtained from the
national autistic society, [www. Autism .org .uk](http://www.Autism.org.uk)***

How do autistic people see the world?

Some autistic people say the world feels overwhelming and distressing and this can cause them considerable anxiety.

- In particular, understanding and relating to other people, and taking part in everyday life can be harder. Autistic people often feel other people appear to know, intuitively, how to communicate and interact with each other, yet this can be a struggle and anxiety provoking for autistic people.
- Autistic people may wonder why they are 'different' and feel their social differences mean they are often misunderstood.

Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders are very common with people on the autism spectrum. Approximately 40% have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any time, compared with up to 15% in the general population. Often anxiety and depression is common with people who have autism.

Many people on the autism spectrum may have difficulty describing how they are feeling. Due to life experiences and events they often have low self-esteem and confidence.

Anxiety disorders and depression are just a few of the mental health difficulties people on the autism spectrum may experience. For more information on other types of mental health difficulties, you may find it useful to visit the websites listed below.

Mental Health support Services:

- **Wirral:** Inclusion matters: www.inclusion-matters-wirral.org.uk
- **IAPT** South Cheshire- 01606 555263
- **IAPT** Vale Royal – 01606 555 211
- **Macclesfield:** www.mytalkingtherapies.com
- For support in other areas, contact your GP for a referral.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- With all of us anxiety is normal, essential and, when appropriate, very useful. Modern man uses anxiety to conquer the unknown. It gives us the impetus to succeed, for example in exams and interviews.

However, in some cases

- it becomes very severe
- it occurs in situations in which it is not usual for people to experience anxiety
- and it leads to avoidance of situations because of the distress it causes.



HOW DOES IT WORK?

Imagine sitting in a field eating a picnic on a sunny summer's day. Suddenly, without warning, you see a bull charging towards you.

What do you do?

The chances are that, without apparent thought, you run at great speed and jump over the nearest gate or hedge!

This is called the “**fight or flight reaction.**”

This occurs because the brain sends a message through the sympathetic nervous system to the adrenal glands, and the adrenal glands pour the hormone adrenaline into the bloodstream, which gives the body strength and speed.

Anxiety can be closely related to other emotions. Imagine being on a loop the loop roller coaster at the fair.

How do you feel?..... Excited, scared, exhilarated, terrified?

The same physical reaction may take place, but our perception of it differs.

COMMON PHYSICAL ANXIETY SYMPTOMS COULD BE

Breathing rate increases

Over breathing
Tightness in chest
Choking feeling
Light headedness
Gasping
Difficulty swallowing

Blood pressure increases

Feeling of pressure in head
Tingling in head
Ringing in ears
Dizziness
Migraine
Blurred vision.

Sweating increases

Hot flushes
Cold sweats
Clamminess

Heart rate increases

Palpitations
Clamminess

Muscle tension and lactic acid increases

General aches and pains
Shakiness in hands and throat
Tightness in throat
Breathing difficulties
Muscle cramps
Headaches

Digestive disturbances

Butterflies
Stomach cramps
Nausea
Flatulence
Poor appetite
Indigestion

Changes that happen in the body can be dramatic, quick, extremely frightening and lead people to think that something seriously wrong is happening to them.

Remember all these symptoms can be due to experiencing anxiety or stress.

Anxiety Circle

PHYSICAL AROUSAL
(Fight or flight)

NEGATIVE
THOUGHTS

BEHAVIOUR
(Avoidance)

How does anxiety start?

There are many different reasons as to why some people have severe anxiety reactions to situations that others do not; it can vary greatly from one person to the next.

From looking at research and theories which try to explain the reasons for excessive anxiety. It appears that for the majority of people it starts in childhood as we are developing our coping skills, and making sense of the world.

Three common factors can be:

1. Some people may have an anxious personality and have learned to worry. This can stem from childhood and their observations of people around them.

The anxiety may not develop until later in life when they are activated by life events and or strains.

2. Life Events

All of us have life events or things happening to us throughout our life, for example a bereavement, moving house, having a new baby. These events or changes can increase our anxiety levels.

Such changes are often difficult for an autistic person to

3. Life Strain

Life strain can be caused from continuous tension, a lengthy period of stress, worry or even fear. For example, relationship problems, stress at work, financial difficulties, ill health or a combination of factors.

We can often be unaware that our stress levels have increased, as this can happen gradually without us noticing or realising.

When stressors are always present and you constantly feel under attack, the fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on. The long-term activation of the stress-response system and the subsequent over exposure to cortisol (stress chemical in the brain) as well as the other stress hormones, can disturb almost all of your body's processes.

This puts you at increased chance of: ***Anxiety, depression, sleep problems, digestive problems, heart disease, memory impairment.***

Some common triggers for anxiety can be :

Saying NO

Meeting new people

Being the centre of attention

Making small talk

Public speaking

Being teased or criticised

Making phone calls

Eating or drinking in public
Speaking up in a meeting
Attending an appointment
Attending parties or social gatherings
Being assertive with family or friends
Talking to 'important' people or people in authority
Stating your opinion

Stressful events are a fact of life. And you may not be able to change your current situation. But you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you.

You can learn to identify what stresses you have and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations.

Other anxiety management strategies include things like **eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise and sleeping well.**

YouTube video – Window into Our World

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDecuOME1Zo>

Treating and Management of Anxiety Disorders

Most of the time we learn to cope with difficult situations, whether or not we are autistic – often by "sitting it out" and learning that we have not come to harm from the situation that worried us.

However, if we have an anxiety, we are more likely to try to escape from the difficult situation or avoid it all together. This leads to a greater fear of the same situation and an even earlier escape the next time it occurs. In other words, anxiety tends to build on and reinforce itself.

The problem with this is that, it can shrink your world and limit the activities you can comfortably engage in.

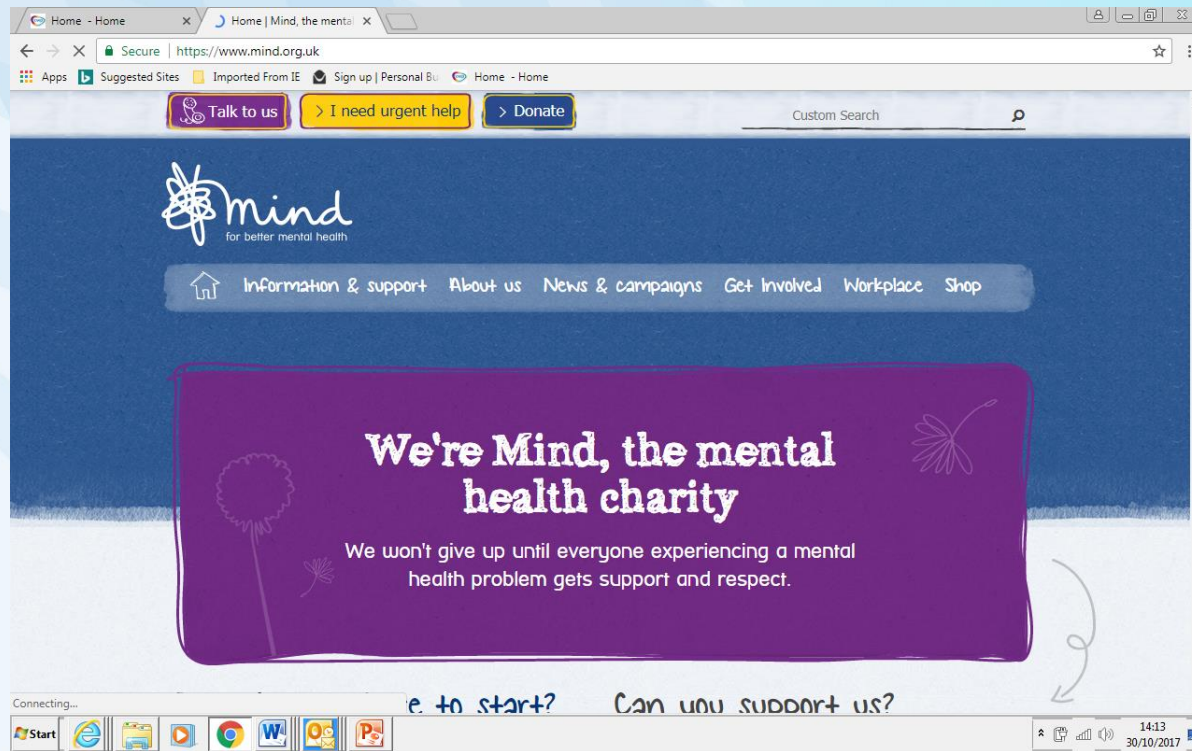
It is important to try to break this vicious cycle, and this is why cognitive (to do with thoughts) and behavioural psychological treatments can often be seen as just as important in treatment as medication.

Usually these treatments involve forming a working relationship with a therapist, building up any necessary skills, and deciding to work through a set of challenges (involving exposure to an aspect of the feared situation) one step at a time that are anxiety-provoking but not intolerable.

This way both the mind and the body learn that the feared situation isn't as dreadful as was initially thought, and this leads to a gradual reduction in anxiety. Such an approach is often very effective.

Mind's website has further information about common anxiety disorders.

Mind



Challenging Negative Thoughts

As we saw earlier one aspect of the anxiety circle is negative thinking.

Negative thoughts tend to:

Make us unhappy

Make us physically uncomfortable

Stop us doing the things we would like to do.

Negative thoughts are:

Easy to believe

Often untrue

Spring to our minds unsummoned

Make things worse than they are

Predict the future

Are unhelpful and useless

Positive thoughts are different because they are:

- Based on good evidence
- Do not predict the future
- Put things into perspective
- Help us to succeed

How do we recognise a negative thought ?

Below is a list of features of negative thoughts:-

1. They make things worse than they are “I’ve never felt so awful in my entire life”
2. They predict the future “I’ll always feel terrible”
3. They stop you doing things “I can’t do that”

4. They are often not true “Everyone must think I’m stupid”

5. They pretend you can read minds
“I know they think I’m useless even though they don’t say so”

6. They seem believable – you don’t think to question them.

Identifying the difference between negative and positive thoughts

Negative	Positive
I'M REALLY GOING CRAZY.	I AM NOT GOING CRAZY, I CAN LEARN TO CONTROL THIS.
THESE FEELINGS ARE OUT OF MY CONTROL.	I CAN COPE WITH THESE FEELINGS
I FEEL SO AWFUL, SOMETHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO ME.	THESE FEELINGS DON'T MEAN THAT ANYTHING DREADFUL IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO ME
I'M GOING TO MAKE A FOOL OF MYSELF.	EVEN IF I MAKE A FOOL OF MYSELF IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD
I CAN'T COPE WITH THIS SITUATION.	I AM LEARNING TO COPE WITH THIS SITUATION
I FEEL TERRIBLE THESE THINGS ARE GETTING OUT OF HAND.	THESE FEELINGS WILL EVENTUALLY PASS
I REALLY OUGHT TO GET AWAY.	I AM GOING TO FACE UP TO MY ANXIETY
I SEEM TO BE GETTING STEADILY WORSE.	I AM DOING WELL
THIS IS SO AWFUL; I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME.	THIS ANXIETY IS JUST WHAT MY THERAPIST SAID I WOULD FEEL

COMMON THINKING ERRORS

Thinking errors are irrational patterns of thinking that can cause you to feel bad and sometimes act in self-defeating ways.

Challenging your thinking errors

Here are just a few examples of common thinking errors and ways to challenge them.



Black-and-white thinking

When you're thinking in black-and-white, you see everything in terms of being either good or bad with nothing in between. For example: either you're great, or you're a loser; If you don't look like a model, you must be ugly; if you do something wrong, then you are completely bad.

The challenge: Look for shades of grey

It's important to avoid thinking about things in terms of extremes. Most things aren't black-and-white, but somewhere in-between. Just because something isn't completely perfect doesn't mean that it's a total disaster

Ask yourself:

Is it really so bad, or am I seeing things in black-and-white?

How else can I think about the situation?

Am I taking an extreme view?

Filtering

When you filter, first you zone in on the negative aspects of your situation. Then you ignore or dismiss all the positive aspects. What are your positives and strengths? You must recognise and build on these. This will help with your confidence and self esteem.

The challenge: Consider the whole picture

Ask yourself:

Am I looking at the negatives, while ignoring the positives?

Is there a more balanced way to look at this situation

Exaggerating/ Catastrophizing

When things go wrong, you might have a tendency to exaggerate the consequences and imagine that the results will be disastrous

The challenge: Put it in perspective

Ask yourself:

What's the worst that can happen?

What's the best that can happen?

What's most likely to happen?

Will this matter in five years?

Is there anything good about the situation?

Is there any way to fix the situation?

Positive achievement Guide

1. Start with small steps, plan targets of achievement. Ask relatives or friends to encourage you to achieve them, but more importantly encourage yourself.
2. Don't be indecisive. Set your target and go for it. Determine to achieve it. **DO IT.**

3. Develop coping strategies to deal with your anxiety. Learn to talk positively about yourself. Re-evaluate. **YOU ARE IN CONTROL.**

4. Don't give in to your panic feelings, you know what they are, treat them with the contempt they deserve. Your objective is to reach your target.

5. Congratulate yourself on any success

6. Remember, whenever you find yourself avoiding because of anxiety, question your motives. What is the worst thing that could happen to you if you go ahead? Is that worse than being anxious all the time?

7. We all have off days. If a target does not go exactly right, don't worry, but get back out there, you can do it next time.

Anxiety management techniques

Breathing and Relaxation Techniques.

YouTube video – 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXKJ33Z7unI>

Anxiety self help book

<https://web.nth.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Anxiety%20A4%202016%20FINAL.pdf>

Produced by Newcastle Upon Tyne Trust

Diaphragmatic Breathing Exercises



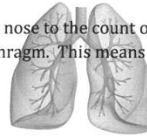
1. Find a time and place in the day when you will not be disturbed (e.g. take the phone off the hook).

2. Sit as comfortably as you can in the chair.

3. Start off by resting the hands gently on the abdomen at the level of the navel.



4. Take a breath in through the nose to the count of four and feel the abdomen being pushed outwards by the diaphragm. This means that the lower lobes of the lungs are being filled with air.



5. Now breathe out through the mouth to the count of four and feel the abdomen return to its natural resting state.

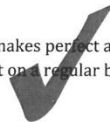
6. Count to two before inhaling again and then continue breathing in through the nose for the count of four and out through the mouth for the count of four feeling the abdomen rise and fall as you control your breathing.

7. I would suggest that you continue this for about twelve to fifteen breaths.

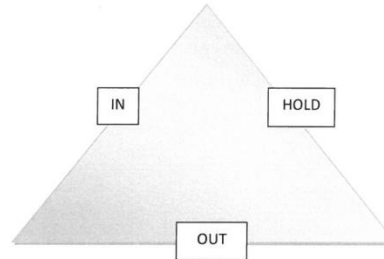
8. The diaphragmatic breathing can be used before relaxation or on its own or whenever you feel anxious.

9. Use the breathing technique every day to start with, and then every other day as you become more proficient.

10. Like most things we do, practice makes perfect and to be successful, the breathing techniques must be carried out on a regular basis.



Triangular Breathing



The main difference in this exercise is that there is a hold between the in-breath and the out-breath (step 3). The hold should be the same length of the in-breath and out-breath. Each side of this 'breathing triangle' is therefore of equal length to the others.

Step 1: Place your hand over your belly button.

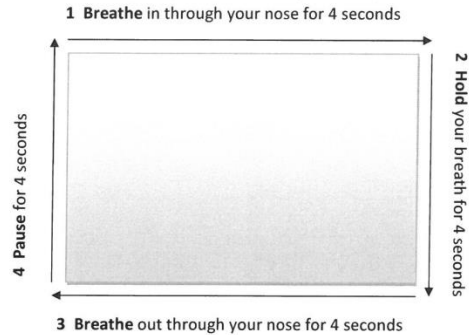
Step 2: Keep your mouth closed and take an extended **BREATH IN** through the nose in your abdominal area. As you breathe in, push your hand out with your stomach muscles. As you get to the end of the breath open the chest and fill it with the remaining air.

Step 3: **HOLD** the breath for the same length as the in-breath (i.e. if you breathe in for 2 seconds then hold for 2 seconds).

Step 4: Slowly **BREATHE OUT** with control through the nose, pulling your stomach in with your stomach muscles, and use your hand to push it in whilst relaxing the shoulders. Make sure the out-breath is the same length as the in-breath.

Repeat steps 2 to 4 five times. You should feel no strain and similarly you shouldn't find yourself catching your breath. If this happens shorten the length of the sides of the triangle otherwise go back to level 1. When you find this level easy and you have extended the length of the breath then move onto square breathing.

Square Breathing



This breathing method has 2 holds. The first hold is between the in-breath and out-breath and the second hold is after the out-breath. The holds should be the same length of the in and out breath. Therefore all sides of the square are of equal length.

Step 1: Place your hand over your belly button.

Step 2: Keep your mouth closed and take an extended **BREATH IN** through the nose into your abdominal area. As you breathe in, push your hand out with your stomach muscles. As you get to the end of the breath, open the chest and fit it with the remaining air.

Step 3: **Hold** the breath for the same length as the in-breath.

Step 4: Through the nose slowly control your **OUT BREATH**, pulling your stomach in with your stomach muscles, and use your hand to push it in whilst relaxing the shoulders. Make sure the out-breath is the same length as the in-breath.

Step 5: **Pause** on the out breath for the same length of time as the in-breath.

Repeat steps 1 to 4 five times. You should not feel strained and similarly you shouldn't find yourself catching your breath. If this happens shorten the length of the sides of the square otherwise go back to triangle breathing.

ACT WITH NORMAN.

- N** = **NOTICE** yourself becoming uptight as early as possible.
- O** = **OPT** out of the tension circle. Do something positive.
- R** = **RELAX**... use your training to ease away the tension.
- M** = **MENTALLY** sum up the situation, are you frightening yourself by thinking negatively? Change it.
- A** = **ACT** in a constructive manner, do not escape or avoid
- N** = **NOTICE** the difference, notice your gains.



RELAXATION



Relaxation is a skill which, like riding a bicycle, can be learned.

To become competent, you require **PRACTICE**. The relaxation exercises below should be practiced at least twice, preferably three times a day for twenty minutes each time.

Choose a time when you can be quiet, uninterrupted, take the telephone off the hook, tell the family you need peace and quiet.

Find yourself a comfortable, but supportive armchair, then:

1. Breathe slowly and steadily, don't force it, you're not training for the Olympics, it should feel easy.
2. Straighten your legs, lifting them off the floor if you are sitting, and point your toes away from you as hard as you can. Feel the tension, concentrate on the hardness of your muscles for a few seconds, then let them flop. Feel the warm tingling feeling of relaxation.



Repeat twice more.

3. Again straighten your legs, now pull your toes towards you, push your heels away as hard as possible. Concentrate on the tension, hold for a few seconds and let them flop. Feel the relaxation.

Repeat twice more.

- 4 Keeping the feeling of relaxation in your legs move on to your bottom. Clench the muscles of your buttocks as hard as you can, concentrate on the tension, then let them flop. Feel the relaxation in your legs and buttocks.

Repeat twice more.

5. Keeping the feelings of relaxation in your legs and bottom, now move on to your stomach muscles. Pull your stomach in as tightly as you can. Feel the tension in your stomach, now let it flop. Feel the relaxation.

Repeat twice more.

6. Now push your stomach out as hard as you can. Concentrate on the tension. Now let your stomach flop and feel the relaxation. Repeat twice more.

7. Keep the feelings of relaxation in your legs, bottom and stomach and move on to your arms and hands. Stretch your arms out in front of you and spread your fingers, stretch out as far as you can. Feel the tension in your hands and arms, now let them flop down, your hands lying loosely in your lap, feel the relaxation spread up through your hands and arms.

Repeat twice more.

8. Now clench your hands into fists, bend your elbows, pull your shoulders up. Try to touch your ears with your shoulders. Feel the tension, now let them flop, your hands falling easily into your lap. Feel the relaxation spread through your arms and shoulders.

Repeat twice more.

9. Keeping the feelings of relaxation in your legs, bottom, stomach, hands, arms and shoulders, move on to your face and neck. Clench your teeth as hard as you can and push your eyebrows up. Concentrate on the tension. Now relax, allow your jaw to fall slightly open. Concentrate on the relaxation feelings.

Repeat twice more.

10. Slowly roll your head three times to the right and three times to the left. Allow your head to rest lightly on your neck. Check the rest of your body for any feelings of tension and use the necessary exercise to ease it away. Hold the feelings of relaxation in your body.
11. Finally, imagine yourself in your favorite most relaxing situation, lying on the beach, after a picnic in the hills, or in a hot bath. Try to imagine it through your physical senses, i.e. the smell of the sea, the feel of the grass under your hands, the sound of the birds, etc. Stay in the situation for three to four minutes.

When you are ready to get up, stretch, have a yawn and slowly stand up.

VISUALISE

Create a place in your mind that makes you feel relaxed and calm, your place of tranquillity will be unique to you.

Take some time to create this image, imagine all of your senses being used, the sounds, smells, temperate, tastes and what it all looks like.

Where/when have you felt at your most relaxed:- imagine and build up a mental picture of this place of safety and calm:

It could be an image of you walking along a beautiful beach,

Snuggled up in bed with the cat next to you.

Or it could be a happy memory from your childhood.

(it needs to be **your** place, **your** image, **your** Calm moment).

When you feel Anxiety growing, start to evoke this visualisation.

- Let the positive feelings soothe you until you feel more relaxed.
- Use breathing techniques to ground you.



There are many different relaxation scripts available to you, a search on the internet will find lots of free and different kinds; for successful relaxation you will need to find your preferred relation style, you may need to try a number of different ones until something feels right.

Visualisation relaxation is an effective way to relax the mind and body by picturing a relaxing scene. These scripts guide you to imagine certain scenes.

Beach Visualisation:

Get comfortable. Sit in a supportive chair or lie on your back.

Relax your body by releasing any areas of tension.

Allow your arms to go limp – then your legs.

Feel your arms and legs becoming loose and relaxed.

Now relax your neck and your back by relaxing your spine – release the hold of your muscles all the way from your head, down your neck – along each vertebra to the tip of your spine.

Breathe deeply into your diaphragm, drawing air fully into your lungs – and release the air slowly.

Breathe in again, slowly – pause for a moment – and breathe out.

Breathe in – and out – In – out

Become more and more relaxed with each breath.

Feel your body giving up all the tension – becoming relaxed – and calm – peaceful.

Feel a wave of relaxation flow from the soles of your feet, to your ankles, lower legs, hips, pelvic area, abdomen, chest, back, hands, lower arms, elbows, upper arms, shoulders, neck, back of your head, face, and the top of your head.

Allow your entire body to sink heavily on the surface of where you sit or lie.

Now that your body is fully relaxed, allow the visualisation relaxation to begin.

Imagine you are walking towards the beach,

walking through a beautiful, tropical forest.

You can hear the waves up ahead.

You can smell the ocean spray.

The air is moist and warm.

You feel a pleasant, cool breeze blowing through the trees.

You walk along a path. Coming closer to the sea.

As you come to the edge of the trees, you see the brilliant aqua colour of the ocean ahead.

You walk out of the forest and onto a long stretch of white sand.

The sand is very soft powder.

Imagine taking off your shoes, and walking through the hot, white sand toward the water.

The beach is wide and long.

You can hear the waves crashing to the shore, slowly and rhythmically.

You can smell the clean salt water and beach.

You gaze towards the water. It is a bright blue-green.

The sun is darting around on the peaks of the small, shallow waves.

You can see the waves washing up onto the sand and receding back toward the ocean.

Washing up and flowing back down.

You can feel the ever repeating rhythm of the waves. Coming in and out.

You walk slowly towards the shallow, clear water.

You can feel the fine, golden, hot sand between your toes.

You are feeling warm with the sun shining down.

As you approach the water, you can feel the mist from the sea gently touching your skin.

You walk slowly closer to the waves, and feel the sand becoming damp and firm under your feet.

A small wave washes up the sand toward your bare feet; it gently touches your toes before receding away back into itself.

As you step forward, more cool waves wash over your feet.

You can feel the cool water provide relief from the heat.

You slowly walk a little further into the clear, clean water. It covers your feet, and passes your ankles.

You can see the white sand under the water. The water is a pleasant relaxing temperature. It's providing you relief from the warm sun. Making you feel calm and at ease with your surroundings.

You walk further into the water if you wish, or maybe you swim.

You are enjoying the sea. You hear the waves, you feel the water, the sun is warm and the breeze is gentle, think about where you are, see the scene in your mind's eye, feel the heat over your skin.

Allow the visualization to deepen. Feel more and more relaxed. Enjoy the moment, enjoy where you are.

You are feeling calm and refreshed.

Your mind is calm, your body feels relaxed.

You slowly walk back out of the water and onto the beach.

You walk calmly along the beach at the water's edge. You feel light and free of worries, here there is no stress, it is all calm. It is just you enjoying where you are.

Useful websites:

<http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/anxiety.asp>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress/?tabname=mental-wellbeing-audio-guides>

https://www.mind.org.uk/media/2145638/exploring-relaxation_2015.pdf

Summary

We hope that you have learnt some information about what anxiety, why this occurs, and some useful tools for managing anxiety