



Vasculitis Related Anxiety Factsheet

Getting diagnosed with a life-changing condition like vasculitis is understandably stressful. The uncertainty and lack of control that vasculitis can present may lead to individuals diagnosed with this condition then developing a number of mental health issues, not least anxiety. However, understanding what anxiety is, and how the symptoms of anxiety can be managed, allows those faced with a diagnosis of vasculitis to focus on what's truly important: how to move forward in order to lead a fulfilling life.

Anxiety UK and The Lauren Currie Twilight Foundation work closely to help those living with vasculitis who want to learn more about anxiety.

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is the feeling you get when you think something unpleasant is going to happen in the future. The word 'anxiety' is often used to cover a broad range of experiences and is linked with emotions such as fear and worry. In fact, 'fear' and 'anxiety' are almost interchangeable terms. Other words such as feeling 'apprehensive', 'uncertain', 'nervous' and 'on edge' also provide a good description of feelings linked to anxiety.

What's important to remember is that anxiety is completely normal and something that everyone experiences from time to time. In fact, anxiety can actually be a helpful emotion, it can help prepare you for events and improve your performance. However, anxiety can also become so severe and intense that it becomes debilitating and starts to restrict your daily routine and life. It's at this point that people often realise that their anxiety has become so troubling and problematic that they recognise that they need to do something about it.

Symptoms of Anxiety

Many people often experience physical (how you feel), psychological (what you think) and behavioural (what you do) symptoms when they feel anxious or stressed.

Some of the most common physical symptoms of anxiety are:

- Difficulty in breathing
- Hyperventilation
- Palpitations
- Increased heart rate
- Increased muscle tension
- Jelly legs
- Tingling in the hands and feet
- Dizziness
- Wanting to use the toilet more often
- Feeling sick
- Feeling as if there is a tight band across the chest area
- Tension headaches
- Hot flushes
- Increased perspiration
- Dry mouth
- Shaking
- Choking sensations

Unfortunately, many of these physical symptoms can also be symptoms associated with Vasculitis which can be particularly difficult for sufferers as it can be hard to differentiate between the anxiety and Vasculitis.

Some of the most common psychological symptoms of anxiety are:

- Thinking that you may lose control and/or go 'mad'
- Thinking that you might die
- Thinking that you may have a heart attack/be sick/faint/have a brain tumour
- Feeling that people are looking at you and observing your anxiety
- Feeling as though things are speeding up/slowing down
- Feeling detached from your environment and the people in it
- Feeling like wanting to run away/escape from the situation
- Feeling on edge and alert to everything around you

The most common behavioural symptom of anxiety is avoidance. Although avoiding an anxiety-provoking situation produces immediate relief from

the anxiety, it is only a short term solution. This means that while it may seem like avoiding something is the best thing to do at the time, the anxiety often returns the next time you face the situation, so avoiding it will only psychologically reinforce the message that there is danger.

How Can Anxiety Be Treated and Can It Be Managed?

As anxiety can affect people in many ways, the methods for treating it can also vary. Generally speaking, an individual should be offered self-help in the first instance, followed by more intense interventions, such as talking therapies or medication.

It is particularly important for those with Vasculitis to find ways to reduce their stress and anxiety because it is known that stress can lead to fatigue.

Forms of Self Help

- ❖ Knowledge is empowering; each case of Vasculitis is different – get to know your condition. Educate yourself, the more knowledge you have, the more you will be able to participate in the management of your difficulties.
- ❖ Journal; It's a good idea to start a journal in order to document all your symptoms, tests, dates, doctor's names and addresses plus any other relevant information. Its likely that you will be asked to recall many details relating to your condition as the years go by to different healthcare professionals and so its useful to have this in place as a memory aid.
- ❖ If your condition allows, then doing gentle exercise like swimming, yoga or walking are excellent ways to boost your physical and emotional wellbeing and crucially, help lower stress levels.
- ❖ Be honest with yourself and others. Pace yourself; It's ok to say you're having an "off" day and to appreciate that some days you will be able to do more than on other days.
- ❖ Ask for help; have people in place to help with child care, cleaning, groceries etc. It's ok to ask for help, it also makes others feel good by allowing them to do something for you.
- ❖ Consider joining a self help group as sharing experiences and coping strategies around stress will help break down feelings of isolation, as well as offering support.

- ❖ Diet is important - so try to avoid caffeine and alcohol, eat regularly and often and avoid sugar fixes. Eat balanced, low fat meals.
- ❖ Try yoga or meditation to ease muscle tension. Get enough sleep as this will help your body rejuvenate itself.
- ❖ Self-help books are also often beneficial.
- ❖ Listen to relaxation music and podcasts.
- ❖ Talking is important, so try to access helplines and speak to others
- ❖ Keep occupied and have structure to your day.

TOP TIPS

- **Know your physical triggers.** What is the first sign that tells you your anxiety is starting? Perhaps it's a slight flutter in your stomach? How you react to that initial flutter determines what will happen next. If you can react calmly to it, this helps. Try to just accept the anxiety: "there goes my stomach having a flutter." If you speak like this about the anxiety that you experience, you are more likely to stay calm than if you say, something like, "Oh no, I'm about to have a panic attack, how will I cope, I might faint, what will people think?"
- **Focus on your breathing.** A number of breathing techniques can help to reduce anxiety. Take a few moments and simply notice your breathing patterns. After a few breathing cycles, take a deep breath. Let your stomach be soft and relaxed and breathe from your lower abdomen. Try breathing in deeply for 5 seconds, holding for 5 seconds, and then releasing slowly over 7 seconds. This will trigger the relaxation response.
- **Nurture your spirit.** If you have spiritual beliefs, meditation and prayer can also help trigger the relaxation response, helping calm the mind and body. Even the simplest of prayers or affirmations can help you let go of a worry and put everyday problems into perspective.

- **Listen to music.** Relaxing music and imagery recordings can promote better quality sleep and increase confidence and serenity.
- **Reduce your commitments where you can and allow some time for yourself.** Concentrate where possible on doing things that you enjoy, particularly when they distract you and bring the focus away from your fear.
- **Don't give up.** Recovery from anxiety can be extremely hard with often the recovery journey feeling like you have taken two steps forward and one back. This is particularly true if you have other issues to deal with, too. Living with anxiety forces you to confront situations that you might find extremely challenging and inevitably this can be draining. There will be times when you wonder if you have the strength to keep going, and because of this you might be tempted to take a path of avoidance. When those times hit, it's important to keep going, even if it's just to take a tiny step forward. You will naturally have good days and bad, but don't feel that you are back to square one – just resolve to start again the next day when you feel up to it.

The Lauren Currie Twilight Foundation fund a dedicated anxiety helpline for Vasculitis patients. Call our helpline today if you need support from anxiety.

The helpline number is:

0845 600 5855

The helpline is open from 9:30 am until 5:30 pm every day.

