

Stress, anxiety, depression - How to talk about it

In a world that rarely pauses, learning to navigate stress, anxiety, and depression has become not just helpful, but essential for maintaining our mental and emotional wellbeing.

STRESS

What is stress and how does it affect us?

Humans have developed the stress response to survive, known as the 'fight or flight' response. When stressed, the body releases hormones and chemicals, such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine.

Stress can be useful, but problems can occur when this stress response happens too often or during inappropriate situations. Triggers could be anything from paying bills to jumping out of the way of a car. Some stress can help a member perform better but, if longstanding, helpful can become harmful.

Having a continuously raised cortisol level is known to increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, which are preventable conditions. It's also linked to weight gain, obesity, and some eating disorders due to changes in eating patterns in response to stress. Chronic stress can result in withdrawing from friends and family, contributing to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

There are many ways you can challenge yourself to treating stress if you feel at risk of 'burn out'. Try one or more of these tips each day (or even give them all a go!)

- **No-tech lunch hour.** Leave your phone in your drawer for the period of your lunch break. Your brain is always trying to solve problems, but it also needs time to relax and recharge.
- **Prioritise relationships** by keeping phones out of sight when having face-to-face conversations with friends and family.
- **Choose to get active** through outdoor or hands-on activities. Choose to connect with the environment, your body, and friends. It's important to try choosing tech-free activities.

ANXIETY

Anxiety disorders often result in significant negative effects on both mental and physical health. Recognising the symptoms and seeking timely treatment where necessary is essential for managing this condition effectively.

In small doses, anxiety can be helpful, giving us that extra boost to tackle life's challenges head-on. But when it becomes constant or overwhelming, it's time to take it seriously.

What causes anxiety and panic attacks?

1. Genes - This tendency might be inherited.

2. Stressful events - Divorce, money worries, bereavement, redundancy, and exams are obvious triggers for anxiety, but usually when the problem disappears, so does the anxiety. But other traumatic events such as car crashes, assaults and fires can leave a member feeling nervous and anxious for months or years - known as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

3. Drugs - Illegal highs from amphetamines, LSD or ecstasy can cause anxious, as can excess caffeine.

Treatments for anxiety

Psychological therapies

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can alleviate feelings of anxiety and panic and help change how to think and act. CBT focusses on current problems rather than the past.
- Exposure therapy is a treatment used to help people overcome fears, anxiety disorders, phobias, or traumatic experiences. It involves gradually facing the things or situations that makes someone afraid or anxious in a safe and controlled way.

Beta blockers

- A type of medication commonly used to treat high blood pressure and certain heart conditions. While not primarily prescribed for anxiety, they can sometimes be used to manage the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Medication

- Anti-depressants are commonly prescribed to treat anxiety disorders and panic attacks.

It's important to note that medication should be prescribed and monitored by a qualified healthcare professional, such as a psychiatrist or primary care physician. They will evaluate specific symptoms, medical history, and individual needs to determine the most appropriate medication and dosage for you.

DEPRESSION

Depression, one of the commonly occurring mental health problems, is characterised by a constant feeling of sadness, and is very different from temporarily feeling low. Individuals living with depression can often experience intense feelings of guilt, low self-esteem and poor energy and concentration, all of which can have a severe impact on day-to-day life.

One of the reasons why depression is so hard to overcome completely is because everyone that lives with it experiences a different combination of symptoms.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Thoughts and feelings

- Negative thinking and suicidal thoughts.
- Numbness or feeling empty.
- Helplessness.

Behaviour

- Detachment from others and difficulty talking to people.
- Self-harm.
- Sleeping or eating much more or less than usual.

Physical

- Sudden increase or loss of appetite.
- Lack of energy.
- Increased feeling of aches and pains.

If four or more of these symptoms are experienced daily for more than two weeks, it is likely you are living with a depressed mood. It is recommended you visit a GP to discuss your symptoms further.

TREATMENTS FOR DEPRESSION

Self help

- Do enjoyable things and set achievable goals.
- Reconnect with others.
- Improve diet and increase exercise.
- Sleep.

Treatments

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).
- Counselling with a trained advisor.
- Interpersonal psychotherapy.

Medication

- Anti-depressants.

Combination therapy

- Usually a mixture of antidepressants and CBT.

Other treatments

- Arts therapies such as music or art to help express feelings.

Isolation is a common symptom of depression, however it is always important to remember you are not alone. Learning how others have learned to live with and cope effectively with periods of depression can be comforting and help you in making that first step to seek help.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Talking about mental health can make a huge difference. But how can a member kick start a conversation like that?

We asked our 24/7 health support line nurses, midwives and pharmacists, for their top tips on talking about mental health.

Accept that you are experiencing difficulties and that it's okay to feel this way

Most of us struggle with our mental health at some point, or points, in our lives; it's not uncommon and certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

Remember you are not alone

Whether it's a family member, a friend, colleague, a GP or someone at the end of a helpline, support is available - they just need to be reached out to.

Be honest

If someone asks how we are, we automatically answer that we are "well" or "fine". But if they ask a second time, or if they express concern, they may very well be genuinely interested rather than just making conversation, and it's okay for you to be honest about your feelings.

Talking while walking or sitting side by side

Face-to-face conversations can feel intimidating, especially if you're uncomfortable or not used to talking about your feelings. Walking or sitting side-by-side can be a better way to broach difficult subjects and enable you to talk openly.

Talk about mental health issues

Far from being a sign of weakness, acknowledging to others that there's a problem can be incredibly empowering, not to mention a huge relief. It's also an important step towards accessing the help you need, whether that's the support and understanding of a loved one, a reduced workload or time off to recuperate, or professional treatment.

Talking can be incredibly helpful to make sense of and manage difficult experiences.¹

¹ [Heads Together](#) - Talking mental health guide

PHC'S MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT SERVICES

When you decide it's the right time for you to take the next steps, we're here for you. We offer a range of mental health and support services that may be available to you as part of your healthcare cover with PHC. Find out more about what these services entail and how to access them.

Mental health assessments and support service

If you are suffering from stress, anxiety, or depression and aren't sure where to turn, we provide quick access to support and treatment for mental health conditions via our clinically led, telephone-based service, without the need for a GP referral.

This service is available to members aged 18 and over and only if Mental Health is a core benefit on your plan.

How to access

Call the PHC claims line on **0800 068 7111** or email **claims@thephc.co.uk**.

They'll check you're covered and advise you of the next steps to get in touch with the Mental health assessments and support service team.

Counselling and support service

If you're facing challenges that seem too much to cope with, our Counselling and support service, including Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), gives you an expert to talk to over the phone or online, 24/7. You can get confidential guidance and support as well as access to short-term counselling (where clinically appropriate). With everything you need in one place, get the right support to move forward on your wellbeing journey, anytime, anywhere.

This service is available to members aged 16 and over.

How to access

To speak to somebody

Call PHC's dedicated Counselling and support service on **0800 316 1213**. Please state that you are a PHC member when you call.

To access the online portal

Visit axabesupported.co.uk and register by entering your email address, followed by selecting a password. Once you have registered you will be asked to add your first name, surname and access code, Phc. Please note the access code is case sensitive.

If you have previously registered for the site, your login details will remain the same. If you have forgotten your password, select the forgotten password link.

