

A Carer's Guide to Anxiety In People with Learning Disability



Fife Clinical Psychology Department
Lynebank Hospital
Halbeath Road
Dunfermline
Fife
KY11 4UW

Tel: 01383 565 210
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This booklet has been written for parents and carers of people with a learning disability

This booklet aims to:

- Help you to recognise anxiety
- Highlight things you can do to help
- Suggest other sources of help and support
- Suggest how you can find support for yourself

It is important to remember that you are not alone – there is a wide range of support, services and professionals available to help you and the person you care for.

Introduction

Anxiety is something we all experience from time to time. It is a normal response to situations that we see as threatening to us, for example, sitting an exam, it would be natural to feel anxious.

However, anxiety can be unhelpful as

- the symptoms can be uncomfortable
- the symptoms can be frightening if someone doesn't know that these are signs of anxiety
- it can lead people to worry that there is something wrong with them

When anxiety goes on for a long time, specialist help may be needed.

People with a learning disability may become anxious at some point in their life. Stressful life events and times of transition, e.g. starting a new job, changes in staff support, are some possible causes, but anxiety may also occur for no clear reason you can think of.

Many people with learning disabilities are not able to express their feelings easily in words. So their actions may have to speak for them. Sudden changes in behaviour or mood, or not being able to do the things they could previously do may all be important signs of anxiety. These changes in behaviour are often mistakenly viewed as just a phase, and so the right help may not be given. However, this leaflet suggests ways to recognise anxiety and how they can be helped.

How can you recognise anxiety?

When a person with a learning disability is anxious, you may notice changes in their general health and well-being and in their behaviour.

Signs of anxiety in a person with learning disability:

- Changes in appetite – eating too much or too little
- Changes in usual sleeping habits. Waking early in the morning or sleeping too much
- Loss of skills (e.g. self-care, independence skills, concentration)
- Loss of interest in daily activities usually enjoyed
- Increase in outbursts of anger, aggressive behaviour or self-harm
- Irritability and agitation
- Pacing
- Drinking more
- Sweating

Things you can do to help?

(1) Speak to your GP or Learning Disability Team about your concerns

As a carer, it may be helpful if you could:

- Keep a diary of things you are worried about or which have changed, including the time and date.

This could help your health professional:

- Sometimes it is difficult to know if symptoms are due to a physical / mental health problem
- To understand the person's recent history and changes in their circumstances – so considering all possible causes of the symptoms
- If the person becomes ill in future

(2) Preparation for Changes

Proper preparation and explanation can help prevent the person you care for becoming too distressed. If you need help with this, your local psychologist and speech and language therapist could assist you.

(3) Encourage good habits

- Encourage the person you care for to eat well, exercise, reduce their alcohol intake, and get enough sleep.
- Ask your Doctor to refer the person you care for to the Community Learning Disability Team.
- Allow the person to express their worries and feelings
- Encourage and assist the person to maintain activities.
- Encourage and support the person to try new activities, sports and social events. This may bring the added benefit of making new friends.

Further help

It is important to look after yourself!

Supporting a person through anxiety can be very difficult. Stay positive and make sure that you also spend time doing the things that you enjoy and which help you to cope. In addition, there are voluntary agencies which can provide support to carers.

Useful Organisations:

The Princes Royal Trust - Fife Carers Centre

Provide accurate, up-to-date information on carer's issues help and advice on resources, benefits, advocacy, or simply a listening ear.

Web: <http://www.fifecarerscentre.org.uk>

The Princes Royal Trust for Carers

The Trust aims to make it easier for carers to cope by providing support, practical help and information.

Web: <http://www.carers.org>

Crossroads

Crossroads aim to help relieve the stress on those who care for people (of any age) with a physical, mental or sensory impairment by enabling carers to take a break. There are three fife groups offering free respite care, at regular intervals at a time that suits carers.

Fife Central: 01592 610540

Dunfermline: 01383 621774

Web: www.crossroads.org.uk

Books:

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has produced a helpful series of 'Books beyond words', which use pictures to help people understand certain life events which can be particularly distressing such as bereavement and times of transition. Supporting text and guidelines are given at the back of each book. Website: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications.aspx>

If you need further information, a list of helplines, voluntary agencies and websites are also available on our website for carers and people with a learning disability:

<http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/>