Understanding Anxiety

A plain-language guide to what anxiety does, and what tends to help.

For general education only. Not a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, or medical care.

What anxiety is

Anxiety is the body's alarm system. It sharpens attention, speeds the heart, and readies you to act when something matters. That response is useful when a real threat is present.

It becomes a problem when it fires often, fires hard without a clear trigger, or starts to shape the choices you make. Avoidance brings quick relief and usually makes the alarm louder over time.

Ways it often shows up

- In the body: Racing or tight chest, shortness of breath, nausea, muscle tension, headaches, restlessness, sleep that will not settle.
- In the mind: Replaying conversations, forecasting worst cases, difficulty concentrating, a sense that something is about to go wrong.
- In behavior: Skipping events, arriving late or leaving early, checking messages again and again, asking for reassurance, putting tasks off.

What tends to help

- Lengthen the exhale. Breathe in for four counts and out for six or eight, for two or three minutes.
- Name what you are noticing, out loud or on paper. Labeling the feeling often lowers its volume.
- Face the avoided thing in small, repeatable steps rather than all at once.
- Protect sleep, and keep an eye on caffeine and alcohol, which can both raise the alarm.
- Move your body most days, even for ten minutes.
- Say the worried thought to someone you trust. Keeping it private tends to amplify it.

What tends not to help

- Waiting for the feeling to pass before you act.
- Asking for reassurance more often than you used to.
- Skipping the thing you dread. Relief now, more fear next time.

When to reach out for support

- You are avoiding things you value, or the avoidance is growing.
- Physical symptoms persist, or panic episodes keep returning.
- Sleep, work, school, or relationships are suffering.
- You are using alcohol or other substances to take the edge off.
- The worry has lasted weeks and self-help has not shifted it.

If you are in crisis, call or text 988. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

A few prompts

1. Which situation has been taking the most space lately?

2. What did my body do, and what did I tell myself about it?

3. What is one small step I could repeat this week?

4. Who could I tell this week, even in a sentence?

Questions worth asking a therapist

- How do you work with anxiety, and what would the first sessions look like?
- What would you suggest if I want to keep practicing between sessions?
- How will we know things are improving?
- What are your fees, and do you provide superbills for out-of-network claims?

For general education only, not a substitute for therapy, diagnosis, or medical care. These prompts are optional. Stop if completing them increases distress and seek appropriate support. This sheet is not monitored; keep completed notes private. If you are in crisis, call or text 988. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.