

Understanding Anxiety

A Psychoeducation Resource for Muslim Clients

Anxiety Is Part of Being Human

Anxiety is the body's alarm system. Without it, we would not look both ways before crossing the road or prepare for important conversations. The problem is not that we have anxiety. The problem is when the alarm system becomes oversensitive.

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ

"We have certainly created humankind in hardship."

Qur'an, Surah Al-Balad, 90:4.

How anxiety builds on itself

The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety

How a single anxious thought spirals through body and behaviour



Interrupting any one stage weakens the whole cycle.

The cycle does not need a real threat to keep itself going. Each step intensifies the next, which is why anxiety can feel as if it has its own momentum.

Section 1: How Anxiety Shows

Physical signs

- Racing heart, tight chest, shortness of breath
- Sweating, trembling, dizziness
- Stomach pain, nausea, sudden bathroom urgency
- Muscle tension, headache, fatigue

Mental and emotional signs

- Racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating
- Catastrophic thinking
- Feeling on edge, restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty sleeping

Behavioural signs

- Avoiding situations, places, people
- Seeking constant reassurance
- Over-preparing or checking repeatedly
- Withdrawal from community or worship

Section 2: Different Forms of Anxiety

Generalised anxiety

Persistent worry across many areas of life, hard to control.

Social anxiety

Intense fear of being judged or scrutinised by others.

Panic

Sudden, intense surges of fear with strong physical symptoms.

Health anxiety

Persistent worry about having or developing illness.

Specific phobias

Intense fear of particular objects or situations.

Anxiety with intrusive thoughts (often related to OCD)

For Muslim clients this often presents as waswasa about wudu, prayer, or belief. See the OCD worksheet.

Section 3: What Maintains Anxiety

Avoidance

Feels protective; teaches the brain the situation is genuinely dangerous.

Safety behaviours

Subtle actions taken to feel safe; prevent the brain from learning we are actually safe.

Catastrophic thinking

Imagining the worst as certain; intensifies the physical anxiety response.

Reassurance seeking

Brief relief followed by stronger doubt.

Section 4: What Helps

Calming the body

- Slow exhale breathing for two to three minutes
- 5-4-3-2-1 grounding
- Wudu with attention to the water
- Brief movement and reduced caffeine

Working with the mind

- Naming anxious thoughts as thoughts, not facts
- Examining evidence for and against
- Distinguishing productive from unproductive worry

Working with behaviour

- Gradual approach rather than avoidance
- Reducing safety behaviours one at a time
- Limiting reassurance-seeking

Spiritual practices

- Dhikr with slow, attentive repetition
- Salah as structured pauses
- Qur'an recitation

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْهَمِّ وَالْحَزَنِ

“O Allah, I seek refuge in You from anxiety and sorrow.”

Sahih al-Bukhari 6369 (excerpt).

Section 5: When to Seek Help

- Anxiety present most days for several months
- Interfering with work, study, family, sleep, or worship
- Many situations being avoided
- Use of substances to cope
- Accompanied by low mood or thoughts of self-harm

أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ

“Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.”

Qur'an, Surah Ar-Ra'd, 13:28.