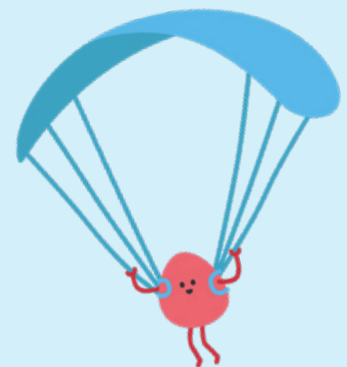# Dealing with Anxiety during COVID-19 using the Clear Fear app

A booklet for young people from stem4

CLEAR FEAR

By Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

About

This booklet accompanies a video outlining how you can use the Clear Fear app to manage COVID-19 triggered and maintained anxiety.

stem4 is a London based teenage mental health charity creating a portfolio of mental health apps for young people and mental health literacy in secondary schools and colleges.

Dr Nihara Krause is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist, with many years of clinical practice and who is also the clinical creator of the stem4 digital portfolio.

Introduction

The outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) has created a new and uncertain time for us all.
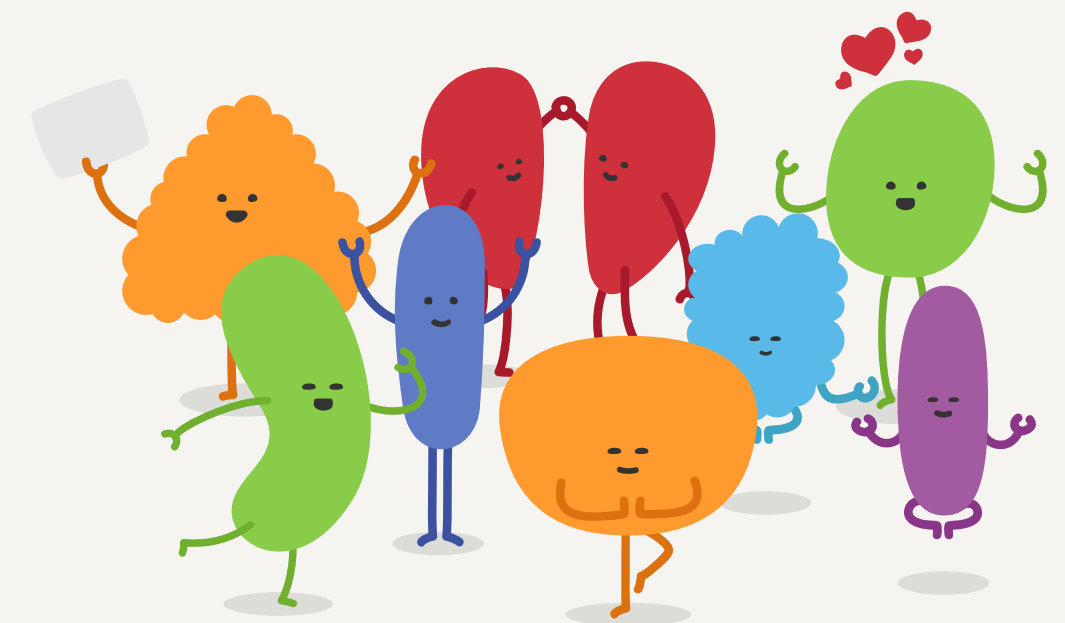
Many young people - particularly those who had problems before the outbreak - are worried about how the situation might impact their mental health.

The most important thing to remember is that - if you find yourself worried or anxious - you are not alone.

This booklet will help you and your loved ones get through this period, and protect your mental health as best you can.

Contents

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Chapter 1
About Anxiety

Anxiety is when intense worry, fear, agitation and tension take over, making a person feel afraid or overwhelmed. Anxiety can focus on everyday matters, as well as what might happen in the future. It can affect our physical reactions, the ways we think, how we behave, and our emotions.

Whilst periods of feeling anxious may sometimes relate to specific events or situations in life, other times anxiety goes on longer, or becomes increasingly large in comparison to the situation.

At this point, anxiety becomes a mental ill health issue and can turn into an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are specific conditions, requiring diagnosis by a mental health professional. However, in general, someone may present with some or all of the symptoms below:

- Strong and persistent feelings of anxiety - these can be both physical or thought based
- Overwhelming feelings of anxiety that get in the way of daily functioning
- Worries or fears that are disproportionate to the situation
- Specific ways of dealing with the anxiety including avoidance or over vigilance
- Compulsive or repetitive thoughts and behaviours
- Anxiety focussed on a specific, fearful event or experience that has happened in the past

Based on the symptoms, anxiety disorders fall into a number of different groups. For most anxiety disorders, and for anxiety symptoms in general, psychological treatment is the most effective. The first line of treatment is an approach called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

You can read a bit more about each of these anxiety disorders in the 'Anxiety Types' section in the Clear Fear app.
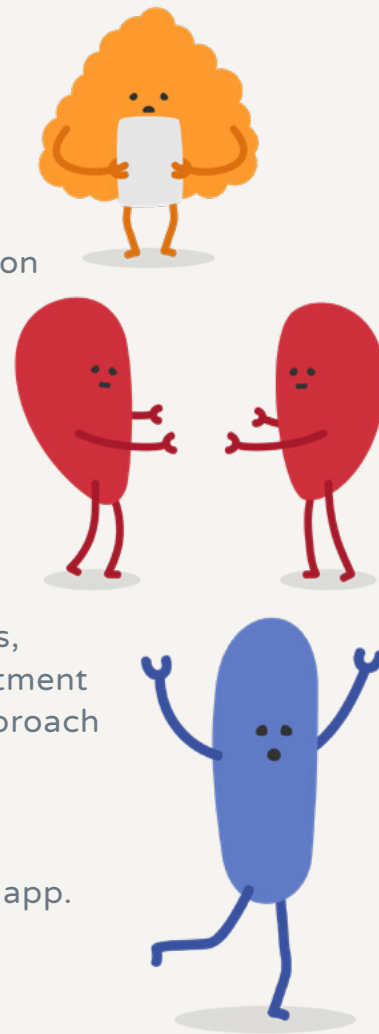
Chapter 2
Anxiety and COVID-19

COVID-19 is a new virus, but it is part of the Coronavirus family which has been around for longer.

The uncertainty of the risk caused by the virus, together with ever-changing information about what the most effective protective steps might be, has caused anxiety in many people - especially those with existing anxiety conditions.

Anxiety and uncertainty go hand in hand because uncertainty is about what's yet to happen and anxiety focusses on anticipating threats and fearing the worst. Since there has been a lack of knowledge on the size of the threat COVID-19 poses, and the knowledge we do have is about the worst, 'anticipatory anxiety' and predictions of fearful situations can be high.
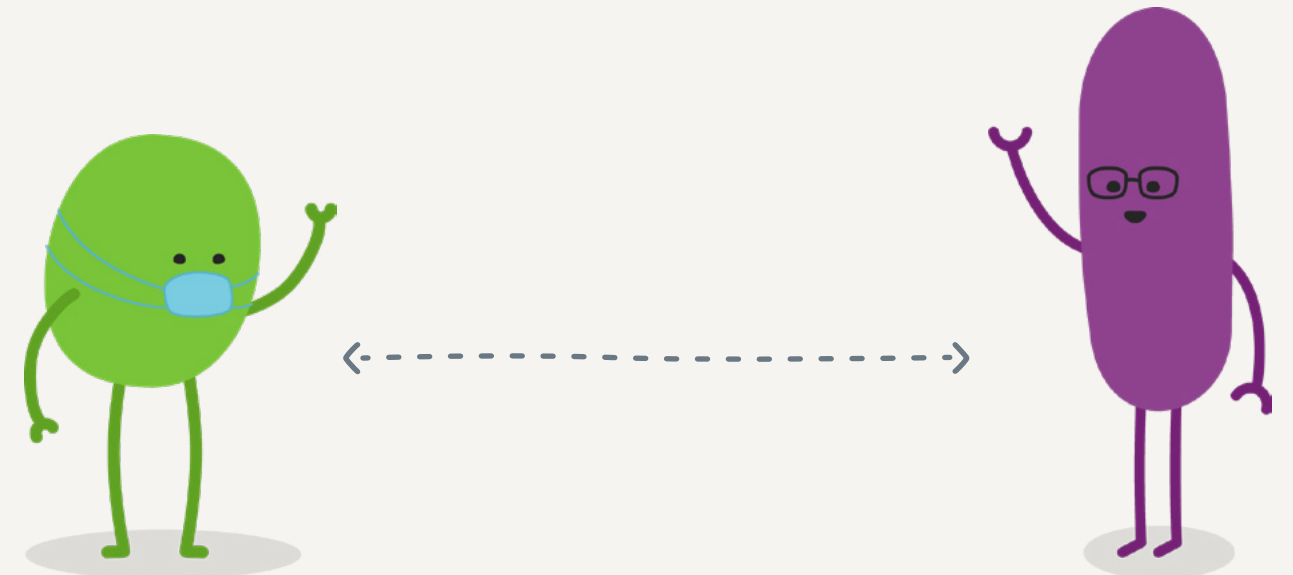
Not knowing what steps to take creates further anxiety since it can make people feel vulnerable. This can be made difficult by experts offering different advice and leaders changing their views. Since the virus is new, there is no knowledge and no predictability of what to expect.

This can be hard for people who are anxious since they often feel safe by being informed and seeking reassurance. The speed of the spread of infection and the big steps taken to curb its impact - such as lockdown - has also been out of the ordinary, causing many to feel they need to be constantly updated with new information. This can often be overwhelming and further fuel worry.

Preventative strategies have unfortunately added to existing anxiety disorders. Frequent hand washing, social distancing and social responsibility are encouraged under guidance, but may also echo some of the common features of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). One of the main fears in OCD is one of contamination. Thoughts, worries and obsessions about contamination will, in most cases, lead to extensive cleaning rituals and routines - the compulsive bit of the condition.

Frequent handwashing and extensive hygiene might therefore increase far beyond what might be necessary to curb the spread of COVID-19 in someone who has OCD. For those with Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the spread of COVID-19 can trigger increased anxiety symptoms, sometimes together with panic attacks.

Social anxiety, sometimes called social phobia, is a common mental ill health condition, especially in young people. Social anxiety is made up of an intense and persistent fear of being watched and judged by others and can affect all areas of a person's life. As a result of the anxiety felt in social situations, many people with social phobia avoid social interactions. The preventative methods of social distancing and shielding can make social anxiety in those who have an existing condition worse.

Health anxiety disorder is defined by a constant worry about health. This includes frequently checking medical records, worrying that doctors or medical tests have missed something important, requiring constant reassurance from others about the absence of illness, and obsessively looking up medical information to check on symptoms, causes and impacts of illness.

It is common for people with health anxiety disorder to avoid daily activities. For those with health anxiety disorder, COVID-19 poses enormous challenges since the many varied symptoms caused by the virus (dry cough, temperature, loss of smell and taste, tiredness etc) can cause multiple worries.

Since the symptoms are not distinct and are part of other common conditions, there may be a lot of misplaced fears around having COVID-19, leading to people making incorrect self-diagnoses. The fact that some people remain asymptomatic can add further doubt about whether they are ill or not, which can cause someone to seek repeated testing and reassurance.

Testing is a double-edged sword for people with anxiety because the fact that this doesn't provide fail-proof information leads to further worry and fear. Limited access to doctors who can provide reassurance and concerns about overstretching the health system can mean that people with health anxiety disorder develop increased anxiety as a result of not having easy access to their usual ways to deal with concerns.
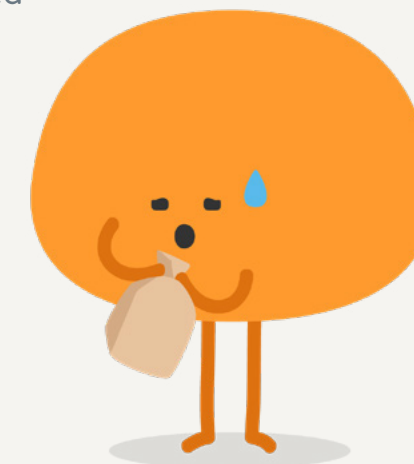
Specific phobias are also part of the anxiety disorder spectrum. A phobia is an intense and overwhelming fear, directed to an object, process or person.

For those with phobias of medical processes such as injections or swabs for example, being tested for COVID-19 may be overwhelming. Some people may also have a phobia of illness or death and this will be heightened at this time.

One of the most difficult issues with treating anxiety impacted by COVID-19 is that usually anxiety focusses on a perceived threat, rather than a real one. Since COVID-19 is not a perceived threat, treatment can be more complicated. The first line of treatment for anxiety is usually Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

CBT focuses not only on helping individuals who are anxious to challenge irrational thinking, but most specifically to stop carrying out a compulsive activity (for example washing hands) in order to prove that the fear is perceived rather than real. In this situation, this sort of exposure has got to be managed with the good hygiene practices in place.

This means working on excess behaviours rather than the behaviours themselves. In the same way, it is important to acknowledge some of the worrying thoughts that might occur during this time, but find a way to manage overthinking them. This will take regular practice.

Chapter 3

About the Clear Fear App
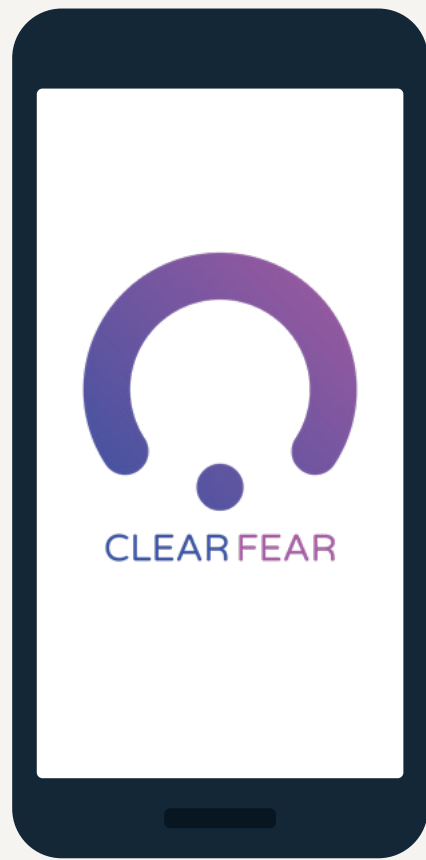
Clear Fear is a free app to help young people manage their symptoms of anxiety.

Created for stem4, teenage mental health charity, the clinically led app has been co-designed with input from children and young people.

It follows a type of treatment called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and uses powerful in-built analytics to measure effectiveness.

The app is completely anonymous and does not collect any identifiable data. Using an app such as Clear Fear is helpful as it can be available whenever you need it. It is also helpful to use as a self-management tool: you can learn to challenge anxious thinking, set goals for change, learn to self-reassure, self-monitor progress and work on keeping things in check.

Whilst Clear Fear does not substitute for a treatment plan with a mental health professional, at a time when services are stretched and access to a service might in itself raise anxiety, having a self-management tool to prompt change and help maintain balance can be helpful.

Chapter 4

Using Clear Fear for Anxiety as Well as for Coronavirus (Covid-19) Triggered or Maintained Anxiety
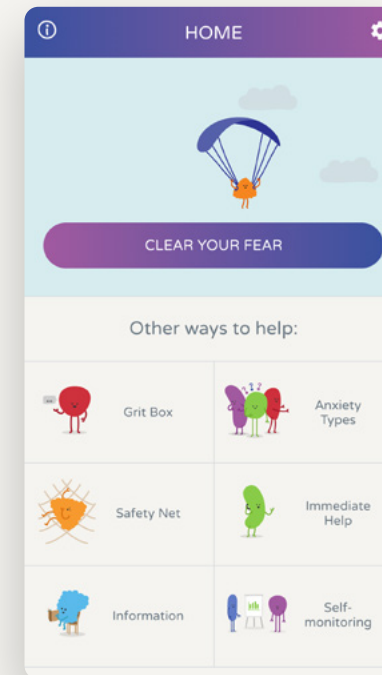
When a user initially logs into the app, they are asked to provide optional information about their age, gender, geographical location, and whether they are in treatment.

This data is completely anonymous and helps stem4 to adapt the app to suit users even more accurately. The user can then set up a passcode if they wish.

The Clear Fear app asks users if they would like to set up a 'Safety Net' which they can add to as they work through the app. This helps the user to write down helpful thoughts and behaviours they can apply when anxious.

They can also add helpful numbers to call. Any positive thoughts and behaviours that are generated whilst using the app are also automatically added to the Safety Net. The Safety Net can also be personalised to fit in with the safety requirements needed to deal with COVID-19. For example, you could add some of the behaviours that help you whilst in isolation.

The app uses a glider analogy to help users face their fears:

'The fear of threat or anxiety is like a strong gust of wind. It drags you in and makes you fight it or run away. Instead, face your fear and glide.'

The aim of using the Clear Fear app to help manage COVID-19 triggered anxiety would therefore be to learn to face this anxiety bit by bit so that you can manage it positively, both in terms of how you think about COVID-19 and also in terms of managing your behaviour surrounding it.

Clear Your Fear
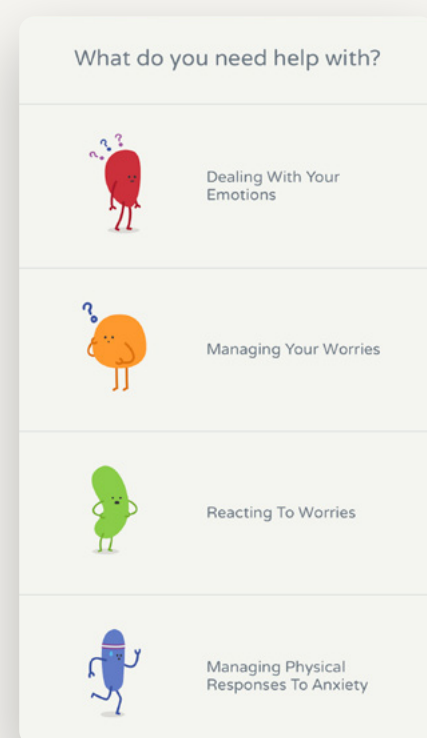
The top part of the app helps you to 'Clear your Fear' in the four different areas that are affected by anxiety. These are your emotions, your thoughts, your behaviours and your physical responses.

In Dealing with Your Emotions, the user can choose one of three activities:

- Express Yourself
- Stay Calm
- Laugh and Smile.

'Express Yourself' provides lots of different activities that can help with expressing emotions. The 'Stay Calm' section provides the opportunity to breathe in a calming manner or to choose a scene to focus on in a mindful way. Laugh or Smile has a joke box and a range of Gifs.

All of these sections can be used to manage anxiety triggered by or maintained by Coronavirus (COVID-19). The 'Express Yourself' section has specific tasks that can be used safely during periods of self-isolation.

In the Managing your Worries category users are provided with three different ways to deal with anxious thoughts. These include:

- Worry Warrior help
- Worry Box
- Worry Ladder

The Worry Warriors provide examples of different types of worried thinking with exercises on how to make change. The Worry Box helps users to put their worries away and then either delay referring to them or to leave and get rid of them at another time, helping place boundaries on overthinking.

The Worry Ladder helps users to put all the different worries they have into a hierarchy and then deal with each worry one step at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many worries.
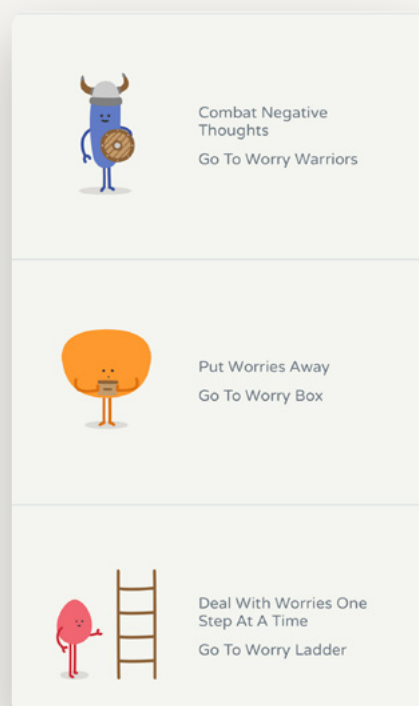

All of these exercises can be helpful in dealing with Coronavirus (COVID-19) related worry. Specifically, the 'What If Worry Warrior' can help in both GAD and in OCD by challenging overthinking whilst the 'Worst Case Scenario Worry Warrior' can help manage catastrophic thoughts.

The Worry Box can store worries that are difficult to address, especially during the night, whilst the Worry Ladder can help prioritise worries rather than becoming overwhelmed.

The Reaction to Worries section has two common behavioural coping strategies which include:

- Overdoing things
- Avoiding doing things
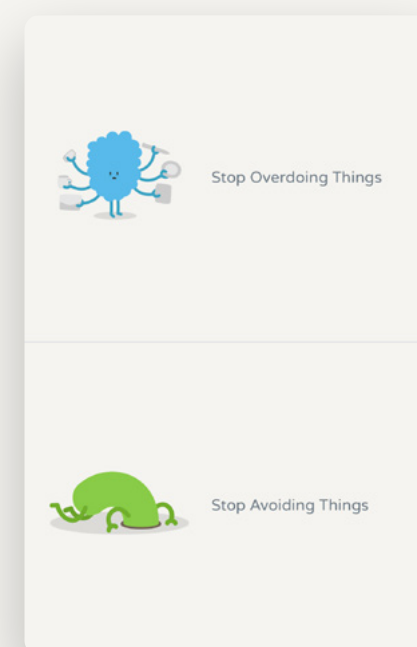
This section helps a user to identify which of their behaviours are related to anxiety and to set themselves some goals on making change.
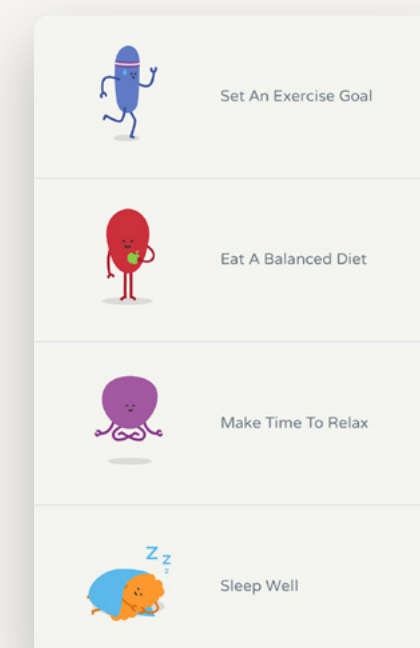
The Reaction to Worries can be helpful for those young people who have OCD and who have developed a number of overdoing behaviours (e.g. handwashing, checking) by setting goals to limit excess behaviours.

The Avoiding Things category can help in managing procrastination or help with the loss of focus and lack of direction that have started as a result of lockdown or COVID-19 restrictions.
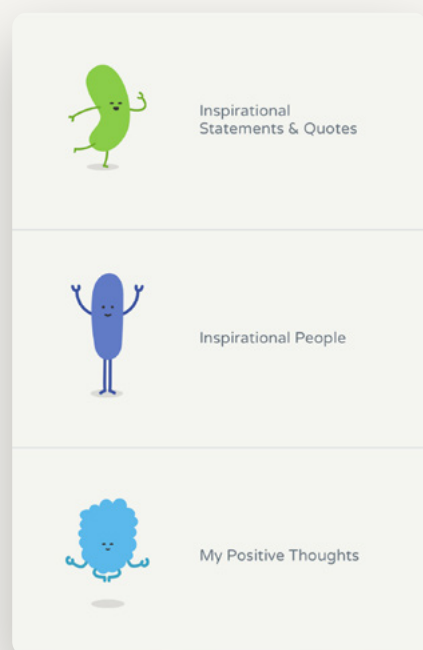

The Managing Physical Responses to Anxiety section has four different sections, with a focus on how to:

- Set an exercise goal
- Eat a balanced diet
- Make time to relax
- Sleep well

Each of these sections provide users with tips and the opportunity to set positive goals.

Other Ways to Help

Inspirational
Statements & Quotes

Inspirational People

My Positive Thoughts

The bottom half of Clear Fear has several tasks.

The Grit Box helps provide encouraging, inspirational and positive messages to resilience. This section includes:
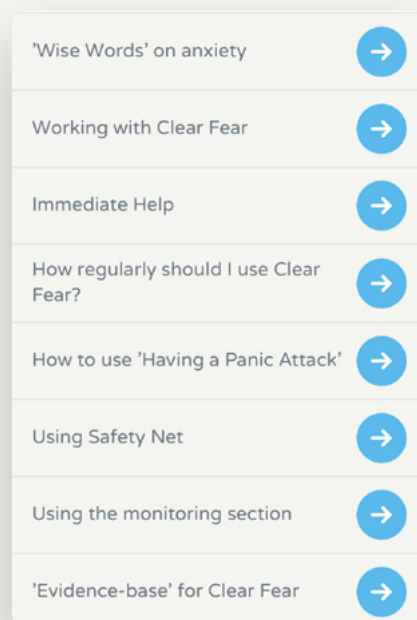
- Inspirational statements and quotes
- Inspirational people
- My positive thoughts

The Safety Net can also be accessed directly in this section and can be used to manage anxiety. New information can be added to this section.

Anxiety Types provides information on the different types of anxiety.

Immediate Help provides an audio guide to dealing with symptoms of panic, a breathing exercise or the safety net.

The Information section provides ideas on the working of the app, whilst Self-Monitoring provides useful information on helping to track anxiety levels and causes. It can help users to understand what tasks help, the goals they have achieved and act as a general tool for self-reflection.

'Wise Words' on anxiety →

Working with Clear Fear →

Immediate Help →

How regularly should I use Clear Fear? →

How to use 'Having a Panic Attack' →

Using Safety Net →

Using the monitoring section →

'Evidence-base' for Clear Fear →

Resources

There are many resources listed in Clear Fear, these include books as well as national resources. Anxiety does respond well to treatment so do share your concerns with a trusted adult and don't hesitate in seeking help.

Anxiety UK
www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Togetherall
www.togetherall.com

Childline
www.childline.org.uk

Headspace
www.headspace.com

Kooth
www.kooth.com

MoodGYM
www.moodgym.com.au

Young Minds
youngminds.org.uk

Books for Teens

The anxiety survival guide for teens
by Jennifer Shannon

The anxiety workbook for teens
by Lisa M Schab.

The shyness and social anxiety workbook for teens
by Jennifer Shannon

The worry workbook for teens
by Jamie A Micco

Books for Children

What to do when you worry too much
by Dawn Huebner

Wilma Jean and the Worry Machine
by Julia Cook

Sitting still like a frog
by Eline Snel

You can find books for common mental health problems like anxiety and depression on the Reading Well Books on Prescription website:

www.reading-well.org.uk/books/books-on-prescription

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supporting teenage mental health

www.stem4.org.uk

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