

Living with Anxiety



edited by Anglia Counselling

a compilation of short stories about living with anxiety

This series, 'Living with Anxiety', looks at anxiety through the eyes of authors sharing their experiences on behalf of Anglia Counselling and to whom we would like to convey a special thank you. - Bob Brotchie

The most common pervasive condition clients call me for help with, is anxiety related!

Our minds are so conditioned!

Are you overly anxious as a result of those (re)cognitions which are coloured by all your experiences; what IS the truth of what we see and hear each day that leads to such a sense of emotional turbulence?

All of us are victim to our past. It is so very challenging to experience life in this moment, seeing things for what they truly are – rather than the cruel best guess our minds are apt to provide. When I am anxious, frightened and scared, where can I find the evidence I need to confirm whether I need to feel that way?

Is that truth here, now?

According to our minds, certainly! The mind is alerted (based on our past) and suggests, no... ORDERS, the physical body to prepare for fight or flight (or disables, to 'play dead') – and dumps the chemicals in our blood stream required to mobilise for action – *whilst disabling that which isn't required.*

Little point then, having an active immune system when running from a threat! The body in order to become the most efficient in managing the threat reduces the immune systems capabilities. And that is fine when a threat really exists. *That is really rather clever!*

However, when we are subjected to this – and then fail to 'burn-off' the chemical dumps because the threat wasn't 'real' and we didn't need to 'act' – then we are heading for problems, both physical and mental.

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I speak from experience as a former paramedic working under incredible (yet privileged) duress for almost twenty years. During that time I 'felt' the physical pains of irritable bowel, chest pains, poor sleep, addictive behaviours, poor diet and relationship challenges – and yet took no meaningful action, believing naively that I am strong enough to keep going, I can and should keep going (or am I a failure) – I will...

I felt all that and more, yet, I failed to act. It would have been anything but failure to have taken better care of 'me'. It would have been a compassionate act and one that would have provided me with even more resilience to be the best, for me – and those I serve and love.

Aged 47 I finally took notice. I had to! (*Why do we have to wait for things to get so disrupted?*) And now I see life in the way it is meant to be cherished. I am now much healthier in mind and body. I am more creative and I am so much better to be around! More than anything, I recognise the value of me. I have found peace in the moment by finding trust and greater awareness in what is real – and what are ghosts of the past. This is in some great part what influenced my decision to become a counsellor and I'm so pleased I have!



My clients room!

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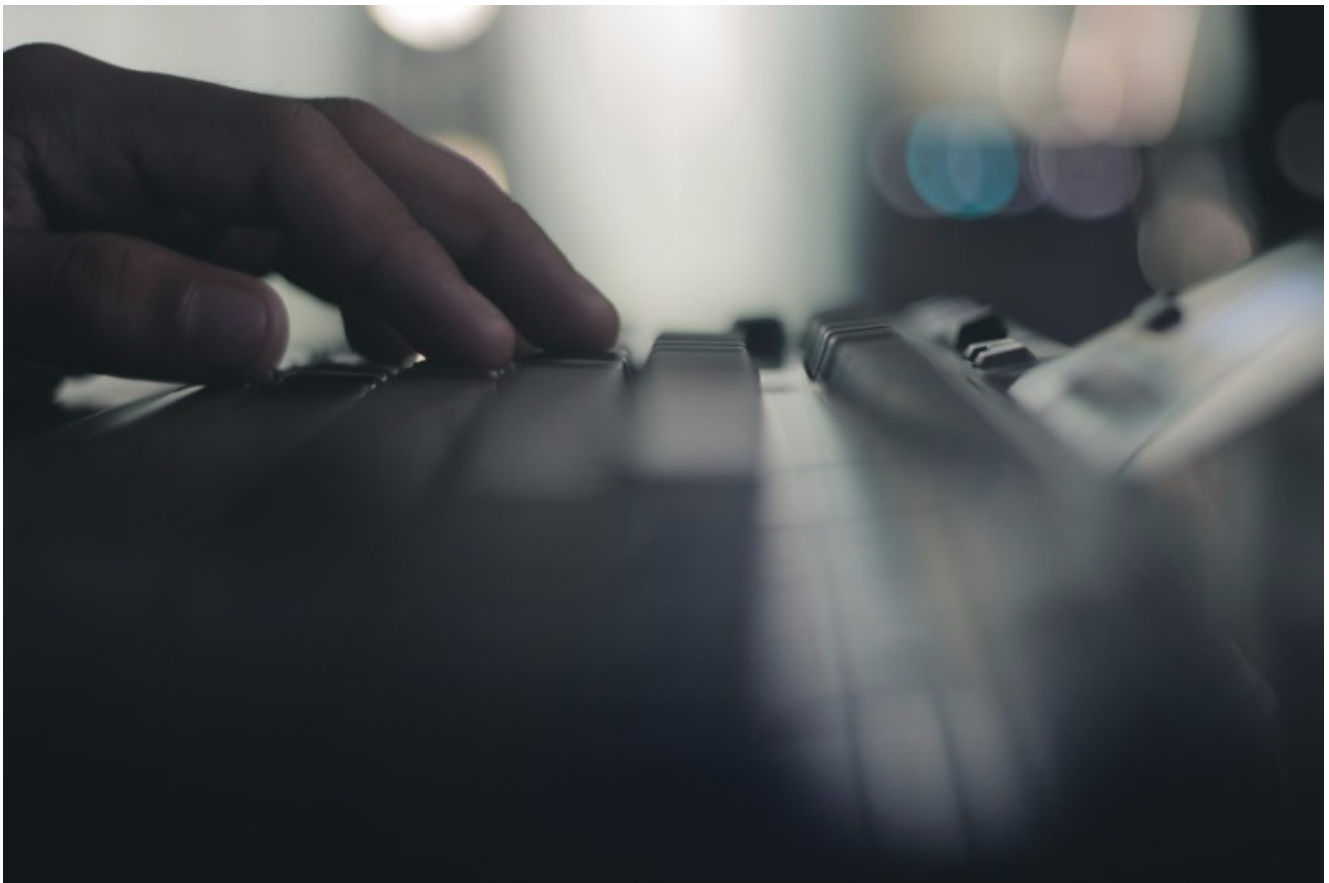
Introducing the Authors

Christine O'Hagan introduces this series with her own experiences of how she lives with generalised anxiety disorder.

Coach, Tremaine Raisa, shares the desperation and the success she has felt and become, despite living with anxiety.

Claire Heard brings her experiences of finding peace from anxiety and how mindfulness and CBT helped.

Catherine provides a younger voice and a touching account.



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Christine O'Hagan introduces this series with her own experiences of how she lives with anxiety. She tells me that just writing her account helped. Yes, it did create some anxiety, but it also provided perhaps even a little objectivity. Does this account resonate for you or a loved one?

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

I first heard this term ascribed to my person in December 2012. After my suicide attempt, Major Depressive Disorder I expected but what exactly was anxiety?

Intense worry, right? I didn't feel I was a worrier. I refused the Benzodiazepine I was offered as I have heard of people getting hooked on those and I did not want to be one of 'those people'. Nor would I take any sleeping pills. I wanted all of my capacities about me as I navigated my way through being a psych patient (in, as they call them now, 'Behavioral Health Facilities'). I just wanted put my arms around my children, assure my parents I was okay, and fix what was wrong with me myself.

Here I am – a year and a half later. I have learned through my psychologists, and therapists, that the anxiety I suffer from, plagues me the most of all my illnesses; yet I understand it the least.

Writing for Living with Anxiety

I was asked to write about my illness for this series as one with lived experience. I am always willing to offer anything I have to contribute and am very outspoken about my conditions in the interest of eliminating stigma and increasing awareness. BUT when I was asked to write my piece about 'anxiety' (the GAD) I immediately became anxious! Of course I would do it, but how can I write about something I don't understand? What if I don't turn in what Bob expected? What if I mix up my GAD and depression symptoms?

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I can write SO MUCH more effectively about depression. So I have thought about what I would write. I thought, stressed and procrastinated, when typically I might dive right in; then I realized something.

I am having anxiety about writing about anxiety. How ironic.

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Anxiety is Pervasive

I do understand that anxiety affects me. I think of it as the 'ying' to depression's 'yang'; a sick, twisted balance in my inefficiencies – a partnership in my deep, penetrating flaw-filled psyche. The depression has always come and gone; a roller coaster in and out of the black hole.

The anxiety is pervasive; persistent. *It is always with me*; my constant companion. When my depression wanes, anxiety clicks into high gear telling me I have to make up for all that I wasn't able to do in 'the black hole'. I have to exceed expectations to atone for my lacking during my depressed state. I have to check, check, check, off the items on my list; duties have to be performed to perfection and goals have to be surpassed because at any moment the roller coaster may dip again.

It may be months, a year before I feel the depths of a major depressive episode again but anxiety tells me everything I am doing is not good enough. It tells me I will never make up for all that I have failed. I am constantly failing, disappointing, losing... Not to mention that I can barely go grocery shopping without getting extremely irritated and break out into a cold sweat. I just went last week and a worker dropped a plastic pallet of water bottles behind me and I about came unglued.

That is anxiety. What I have just written IS my GAD. My partner for life.

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Tremaine Raisa, a personal empowerment coach and author, shares her wonderfully inspiring story of the desperation and the success she has felt and become, despite living with anxiety.

Shhh...

I don't know when I first realized I had an anxiety problem. Looking back, there were all sorts of signs; the choking sort of panic that gripped me when adults spoke to me, the time I froze in an exam during third grade with heart skittering in my chest before I burst into tears an hour later. Then there was my early inability to make decisions because *'What if that doesn't work? What if I don't like it?'*

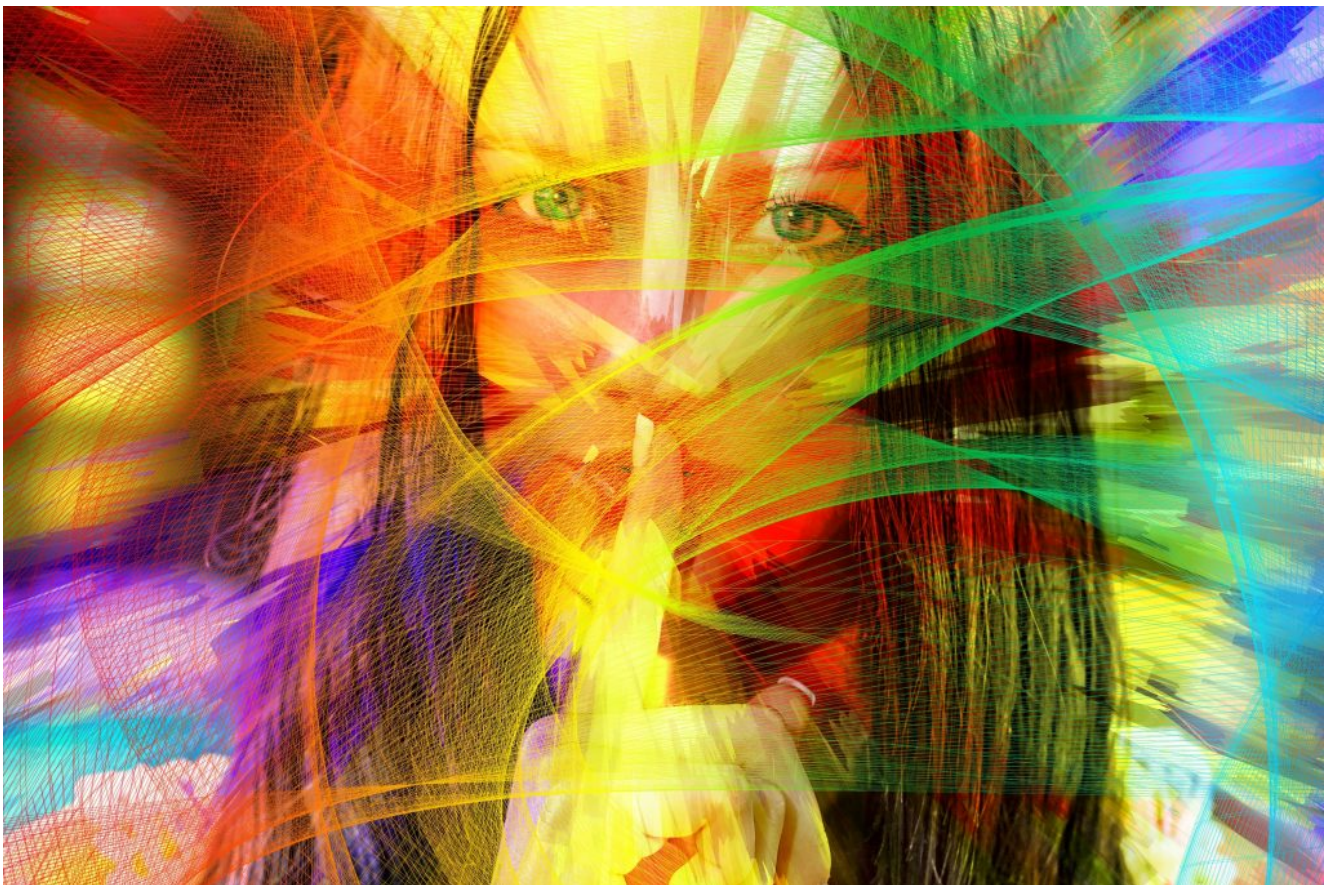
I didn't know it was anxiety. I thought I was crazy. No one else seemed to have the same struggle I did. As a child, people would ask me "What's wrong with you?" and "Why can't you speak?"; I'd be punished for 'ignoring' adults who spoke to me. I wasn't able to articulate that I couldn't speak because my head would suddenly go blank then fill up with too much – too much thought; too many questions, too much doubt and confusion and too much of *not enough air, not enough air, 'not enough air'*.

I spent my teen years in a constant state of tension and worry. Finals were marked with panic attacks and blackouts that resulted in misplaced tools and failing grades. After I graduated and started working in my father's print shop, I spent most mornings anxious to the point of nausea, curled up on the floor unable to do anything, drowning under the crushing weight of *'What if?'*

I was nineteen before I found out about anxiety as a disorder. That was the same year I learned to say 'Shhh'. I was never diagnosed, since I couldn't get anyone to believe that I had an actual problem and the country where I'm from isn't yet much a part of the conversation on mental health.

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One night after a gruelling day of mess-ups, I stood shaking in front of the shop's industrial guillotine with tears running down my face, preparing to put my head beneath the blade. The incessant questions in my head had risen to a mind-numbing crescendo with my supervisor's admonishments playing over and over in my head and I remember just wishing it would stop, so I could find the tools to adjust the blade, just chanting 'shhh, shhh' for hours. Until it worked.



I left shortly after that and started working as a cashier at a local supermarket. It terrified me, but I kept telling my brain to 'shhh', stubbornly blocking out the white noise.

I taught myself to *breathe in* the face of each new customer, just accepting the rush of thoughts and worries and questions as they flooded in; accepting them, and separating myself from them, helped me to manage the transition from 'terrified to talk to anyone' to 'smiling at each customer and striking up conversations on the fly'. It was amazing.

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As soon as I started to see responses, positive responses from total strangers, that engaging in conversations wasn't the death-defying stunt I thought it was, that I wasn't stupid or dumb or had something wrong with me, my confidence skyrocketed.

For the first time, I had 'quiet' in my head!

Not Cured

That's not to say I'm cured. To this day I still get anxious about speaking to strangers, particularly through video. Give me a song and put me in front of a camera and I'll sing it no problem, but to speak? I'm working on it! I generally get anxious over trying new things, but I work through them by remembering the following things:

1. People generally do not wish ill on others they don't know, so no one is secretly wishing I fail.
2. I've accomplished so much despite feeling anxious.
3. Trying this (whatever it is) doesn't mean I'm stuck with it. I can always change my mind.
4. I have something to offer. There are lovely people out there that can benefit from what I know and have experienced.
5. Trying new things is a part of change, and change is a constant of life. Ergo, I'm doing something pretty normal.

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Reminding myself of what I have already done, or overcome, goes a long way in keeping the *flood of mind-noise and choking on nothing but air feeling* at bay. Two things, though, have kept me sane when even my personal accomplishments could not:

The Serenity Prayer

Lord grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
The courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference

AND

Que sera, sera

Whatever will be, will be...

I began to spend a lot of time online, connecting with others with similar stories. To know that I am not alone in this struggle has been the most liberating experience so far. As nerve-wracking as it may be, if you're struggling with anxiety in any shape or form, you may find it beneficial to reach out to others.

I Won't Lie

I could tell you it'll be easy, but I'd be lying. There will be days when you doubt with your whole being that you can do it, but stick to it. I can guarantee that the benefits and healing you gain, far outweigh the struggle; at the end of the day you will see yourself as fuller, brighter... more brighter and vibrant than you ever thought possible.

Take control of your thoughts and use the noise to fuel your progress.

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This is a wonderful story from Claire Heard, which I hope illustrates how, when we find keys that work for us as unique individuals, we can become less like victims – to that which doesn't serve us. It is natural for us to fight any pain, but mindfulness can provide for levels of acceptance to reduce the impact of that pain.

Anxiety, Stress and Mindfulness

I have struggled with anxiety most of my life, certainly since childhood. I was a clingy, shy child and I remember first feeling anxious aged 8-9 when going into new or social situations.

I found it hard to make friends and throughout my school years spent a lot of time feeling lonely and being bullied. At 15, I realised I was pretty clever and began getting praise from my teachers and parents for the good grades I was achieving. This helped compensate for my chronic low self-esteem and I became addicted to achieving – becoming a perfectionist.

I pushed myself too hard to get top grades and would suffer severe stress and anxiety before beginning almost every piece of work due to the pressure I put on myself to achieve a top mark. I gradually got better at socialising and, by the time I went to university to study English Literature, I felt more confident interacting with people. The inner feeling of worthlessness remained, however, and I continued to constantly pressure myself to achieve top grades.

I was determined to get a *First-class* degree and drove myself to the edge of a breakdown in pursuing it. I contemplated suicide, for the first time, in my 2nd year and my university years were dominated by the stress and anxiety accompanying every assignment and the euphoria or depression following each mark. By the third year I was experiencing insomnia and heart palpitations from the constant anxiety.

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It didn't occur to me to seek any help because I didn't realise I was suffering an illness; I thought it was just me. I focused on getting the *First* I wanted and being able to relax after, but I didn't plan for what I would do after university. On results day, I thought about throwing myself in the river on the way home if I didn't get my *First*. I did get the *First* I wanted and felt a surge of euphoria. I was happy for a few weeks, then I felt the void where university had been and, struggling to find work, experienced my first major depressive episode.

Medication and CBT

I waited almost a year before seeking help for my depression and anxiety. When I did I was sent away for 6 months, then put on antidepressants and referred for therapy when I returned. The medication didn't help much and I struggled on for 2 more years until my parents paid for me to see a psychiatrist privately. She managed to find a medication that had some impact and I started seeing a private therapist for CBT, having been on the NHS waiting list for a year.

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The therapy wasn't very helpful but when, another year later, my CBT on the NHS finally came up I completed that and did make progress. I had lost all confidence having been unemployed and too scared to apply for jobs for years – but the CBT helped me apply for a volunteering role that gave me some structure to my week and a sense of achievement.

MBCT

A few months after completing my CBT I was offered mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) in a group on the NHS, for people who suffered repeated depressive episodes or bipolar disorder. The psychologist running the group explained to me that it was a therapy based on meditation. I had been attending yoga classes for 3 years and found them useful so I decided to give the MBCT a go.

I found the MBCT challenging as we had to try to meditate every day – which was a commitment I found hard to stick to. I did manage to meditate several times a week though. In the sessions we did some meditation and discussed Mindfulness – being present in every moment rather than acting on auto pilot, ruminating on the past or worrying about the future. We discussed how to be aware of our thoughts and feelings and respond mindfully to situations.

The MBCT soon helped me to cope with painful memories from the past; we did a “breathing space” of 3 minutes, 3 times a day for 2 of the weeks. The *breathing space* was made up of:

- one minute scanning the body and acknowledging current thoughts and feelings
- one minute watching the breath
- one minute considering how you feel now.

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On one of the mornings I was hit by a painful memory and all the related emotions, ending up in tears. Normally that would ruin my day but I tried the *breathing space* and afterwards felt like I had let go of it to some extent. The *breathing space* is so simple but can stop an automatic bad pattern of spiralling negative thoughts.

What I Gained from MBCT

The MBCT course lasted 10 weeks and afterwards we were strongly encouraged to continue to practice the meditation on our own. There were several follow up sessions (every few months) after course completion, which I found very useful. I continued to meditate on my own, but not as often as I should have or intended to. However, I did feel that something had changed in my brain as a result of the MBCT and I was able to detach more from negative emotions and challenge negative thoughts better.

I think the MBCT was a major factor in my mental health improving and avoiding another major depressive episode for the next 3 years.

Over the past 2 years my mental health has been more up and down, mainly due to life's stresses. I am planning to start meditating more again to benefit from the benefits of mindfulness. I do think a mindfulness group is very useful in keeping people on track with their practice, because left to your own devices at home it's easy to be distracted. However, whilst you might have nothing to show physically from a meditation session the impact on your mental health is invaluable.

I would highly recommend mindfulness and meditation to everyone with, or without, a mental illness.

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Catherine provides a young voice and a touching account. She is courageous in sharing her story and I found when reading this account, whilst preparing it for publication, a number of thoughts and emotions. I felt incredible compassion but also a sense of hope – that with the determination Catherine holds - she will continue to grow trust in the world.

I'm Catherine

Hey, so I'm Catherine, 21 years old and I suffer with anxiety, depression and bits of other mental health issues! I'm going to chat away about my anxiety, just how it affects me in every area of my life. Anxiety, something that we ALL experience at some point; before a first date, before a job interview etc. But someone like me who has anxiety, experiences that 24/7.

Below, I've talked all about how anxiety affects many areas of my life and hopefully this gives you some insight into something that many people may not understand.

Family

My anxiety started at a very young age; it was "official" at age 12, but I'm pretty sure I had anxiety since I was born, basically. Anxiety has a long standing history in my family, but that hasn't made it any easier!

The person it has affected the most would be my brother, because it affected my school life and I often refused to go; it made for a lot of early morning rows with my mum. My brother, who is younger saw a lot of this and to this day still brings it up. My Mum has always been my rock, she's a very stable person and is always there to listen to me. She has her moments but all-in-all she is always there for me and there is no way I'd be here without her.

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Finally (I'm only talking about my family I live with or I'd be here forever) my dad. He's affected, but we are not massively close so I can't honestly say how he's affected. I think basically my family have been massively affected because a part of my anxiety is if I feel too nervous, I run. It means I've bailed on a lot of things so trust is thin on the ground!

It's also affected money situations. I can't work at the moment due to my mental health and I also have debt that I am lucky enough my parents are paying off. This obviously puts a strain on my parents money as they are supporting me again.



Friends

As my anxiety came to light while I was in school, I basically lost every friend I had and I didn't gain any until I was 15/16.

Children/young teens don't always understand mental health problems, and so they can often be mean as they don't understand and don't know how to react about it.

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When I was 17 I got my first job, so I then lost most friends all over again! I gained some via my job but since then I basically don't really have friends. The few I do have now are amazing; they are very supportive and always understanding! I'm not very social, I don't go out or anything like that, most of my friends have been made via the internet.

I think anxiety, and mental health in general, is in a way a good test of friendship!

I'm a big believer in that if your friends don't stay with you in your worst moments, they don't deserve you in your best.

Love Life

For me, as my school life was so massively affected I didn't have any love interests in school; I had zero love life until I was 19. When I was 19, I felt in a really good place so I joined a dating site; I did this as I was in a good place but I wasn't a very socially out there person.



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I had 2 dates when I was 19, but when I hit my 20th year I started struggling again, and I had problems. I would talk to a guy online, really like them, arrange to meet then bail when I got too nervous. This has happened many times and nowadays I basically don't have a love life! I'm fed up ending up hurting myself and the guy in question.

In the future, of course, I want my love life back! But I'm not hurting anybody else any more for now.

Myself

Obviously, anxiety does affect the person who suffers with it! For me, not being too dramatic – but its ruined my life, quite simply – in various ways:

- I don't have a love life. I'm 22 this year and all I've ever wanted is to get married and have children, but I don't see it happening any time soon.
- I'm not very independent. I can't leave the house by myself very easily. I need other people with me (normally my mum) when I'm not at the house. I do not feel like a 21 year old!
- I have no social life. I do sometimes feel like I've experienced nothing of what I would have liked to by my age!
- I don't work at the moment.
- I don't do what I want to.
- I don't have the life I want. I know many people would say "Well, go get it then!" but it doesn't work like that! When stepping out into the back garden gives me the shakes, I can't have the life I want!

Basically, anxiety is a horrible thing. I've had many things for it, CBT, meds, therapy you name it! I haven't found much that works. I still take meds and I use CBT sometimes but basically its a never-ending fight, but I'll get there!

If you know someone with anxiety, please be there for them. It's a lot harder than many people think, to cope with anxiety, but having supportive people around you makes a lot of difference.