




conquer your fear of falling



Aberdeen City Health & Social Care Partnership
A caring partnership



"I can avoid falling if I stay in my chair"

"... but life would be so boring, that it wouldn't be worth living"

conquer your
fear of falling



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The information in this booklet is for anyone who has a fear of falling that prevents them doing the things they enjoy.

At some point in our lives many of us will have had a fear of falling.

This can be the case for people who have never fallen, but is a common feeling following a fall.

This is quite normal and makes reasonable sense, as long as it doesn't develop into a lasting fear that prevents us from living life to the full.

A fear of falling can lead us to stop doing things that we really enjoy. We might stay at home rather than go out, or only go out when someone we trust is there to help.

Limiting your activity in this way can make you feel less confident, dependent and frustrated, and can lead you to lose touch with friends and family.

What are the emotional effects of fearing a fall?

You may feel lonely and isolated, and could find it difficult to talk about your feelings with those close to you. You may worry about upsetting them and keep your feelings hidden.

You might feel you have lost control and there is nothing you can do to change the way you feel.

How does it feel to be anxious?

A fear of falling can at times feel overwhelming. It can make you anxious about living your life from day to day.

There are three parts to the feeling of anxiety:

1. Physical sensations:

- Shaky legs.
- Irregular breathing.
- Churning stomach.
- Sweating.
- Trembling.
- Racing heart.

These sensations all feel unpleasant. However, they cannot harm you and are just the body's natural way of reacting when we feel we are in danger.

2. Mental Anxiety

- Worrying thoughts – often about falling.
- Fearing the worst – “I will injure myself if I fall, and then things will be worse”.
- Focusing on negative outcomes – “My legs feel shaky. I am bound to fall” rather than – “This has happened before and I was fine”.

3. Avoidance Behaviour

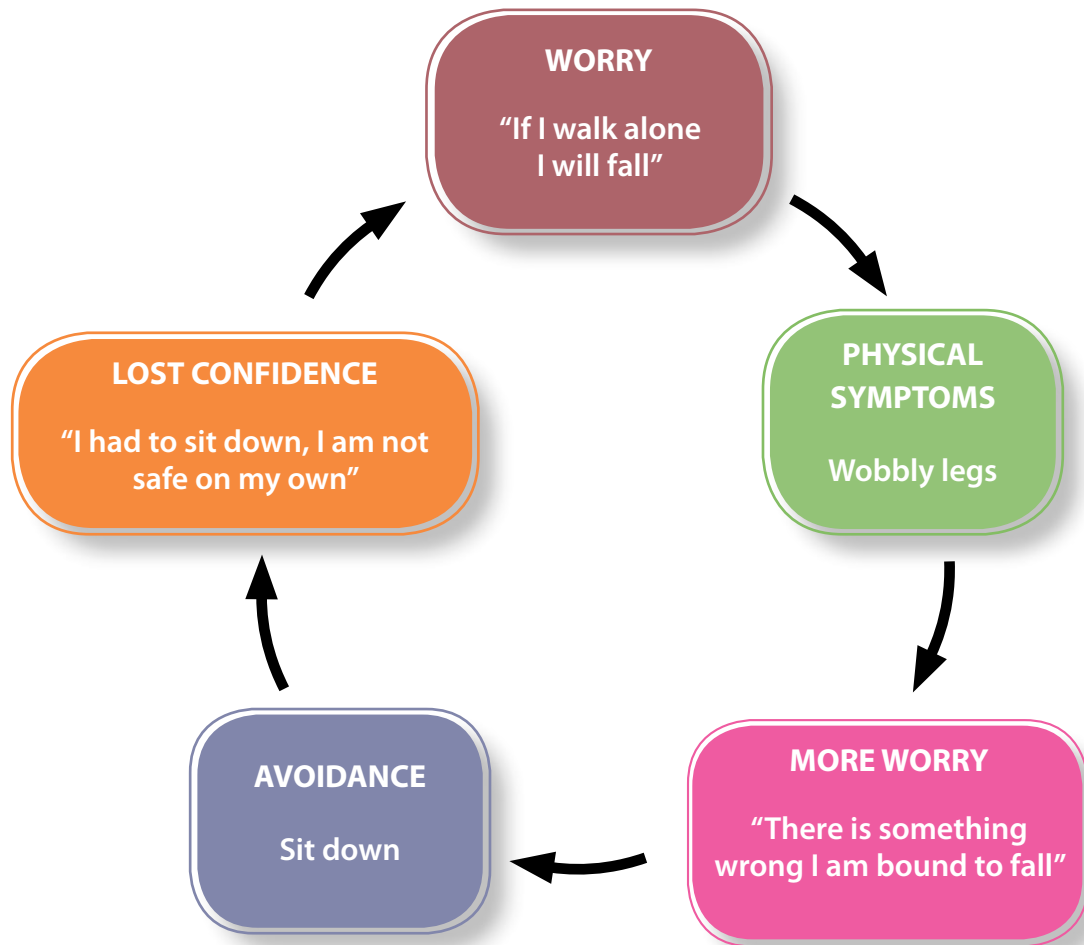
- Sometimes it feels safer to take action to avoid what we fear – If we fear we will fall we may try to stay sitting down and only get up when it is essential.
- We may wait for visitors to arrive to do activities that we find worrying. These are known as safety behaviours.
- Avoidance behaviours may become a habit that is difficult to break.
- We may rely on others to accompany us when we walk and, therefore never build the confidence to find out how much we can do for ourselves.

Such thoughts can make your anxiety worse and could even act as a trigger.

This can result in a vicious circle

AVOIDANCE stops us from doing things and results in LOSS OF CONFIDENCE.

Loss of confidence results in ANXIETY and feeling that we have failed.



Why does anxiety affect how I walk?

Fearing a fall may produce an immediate effect – making us feel scared and preoccupied, but it can also have a long term effect.

Negative thoughts can distract us from walking:

“If I fall, I will injure myself and no-one will be around to help me ” this reduces our attention and affects our ability to accomplish the task in hand.

It is more difficult to walk naturally when anxiety produces physical effects such as increased muscle tension and a racing heart.

We can end up avoiding more and more situations until the only activity we do is that which is essential. This can eventually affect our physical fitness and make falling more likely.

Our anxiety increases as everyday tasks become more over whelming, and so our anxiety continues to grow.

What can you do to help yourself?

You may have many good reasons to worry about falling. Asking for advice from your doctor, nurse or therapist may help.

However there are things you can do to help yourself.

Physical Anxiety

When we are anxious we often over-breathe – try to slow down your breathing. Slow deep breaths can help calm you down.

Try using relaxation exercises. There is one at the end of this booklet.

Ask your Occupational Therapist for advice on other relaxation techniques. Then, if you feel panicky you will have a way to deal with your feelings.

If the physical and mental effects of anxiety are a regular problem it is important to tackle this in order to regain your confidence.

Mental Anxiety

It is easy to ignore what is good and focus on negative things when we are anxious. Try to focus on the positive things. List the things that have gone well or that you have enjoyed. This will help to improve your confidence.

Avoidance behaviours

Do not avoid walking. We know that if you avoid walking it will affect your confidence and your fitness. Try to walk regularly, even if it is only over a short distance. Set yourself small goals that you can achieve and congratulate yourself when you move on to the next goal.

Step by Step!

1. Preparation

- Do not hurry!
- Make sure you feel ready before you get up.
- Check that your breathing is slow and relaxed.
- Remind yourself: "I can do this, I have done it before and I can do it again".
- "Later I will look back and wonder why I was so worried."

2. Walking

- Focus on your walking.
- Plan your journey in advance and remind yourself that you can do this.
- If you feel panicky or scared it is OK to stop, take a few slow breaths and continue when the feeling has passed.

Remember these feelings are only anxiety and nothing more.

3. Afterwards

Congratulate yourself on what you have achieved.

Tell yourself: "I managed it and it was not so bad".

"It was scary but I coped and I will do again".

Treat yourself to something nice!

4. Preparing for next time

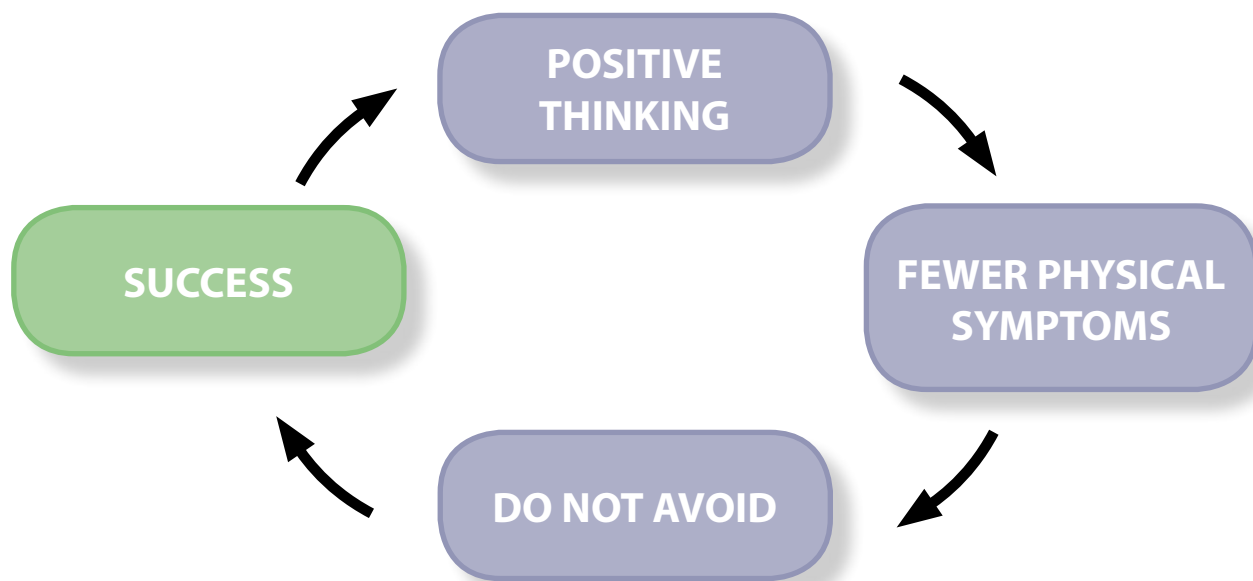
Now you know what you can do. You have proof! Use this to conquer your anxiety whenever it becomes a problem.

“When I control my negative thoughts, then I can control my fear of falling!”

“I know I can do it, so next time it will be easier.”

Recognise your successes! As your confidence grows try to push your goals a little further.





“I can control my fear of falling by practising positive thinking. I can stop the cycle of anxiety if I keep working on it”.



“You will never fall if you stay sitting down... but neither will you have any quality of life”.

If you get the right help from professionals, and use this booklet to help overcome your fears, you will feel more confident.

Then if you did fall again it would be easier to put it down to experience:

- Were you using your walking aid?
- Did you get up too quickly?
- Was it because of something that you had no control over like an uneven pavement?
- Remember to think positively about what has happened.
Don't let yourself revert to a vicious circle of worry and avoidance.
- Remind yourself that you have come through this before and found your confidence once more. You can do the same again.
- Do not avoid activity.
- Keep walking regularly to avoid losing confidence.

Try using the following relaxation exercises

Anxiety produces tension in our muscles. This tension can result in unpleasant physical sensations. This may include:

- Headache.
- Stiff neck.
- Painful shoulders.
- Tight chest and difficulty in breathing.
- Trembling.
- Racing heart.
- Churning stomach.
- Tingling in hands and face.
- Back pain.

These sensations often increase our anxiety and make us more tense.

Relaxation is the best way to control tension.

The ability to relax in this way does not come easily. It is a skill which requires practice and which has to be learned.

It can then become a valuable way of dealing with anxiety. Relaxation can relieve your body of tension and set your mind free of worrying thoughts.

Try using the following exercises. They are designed to help you to learn to relax. When you can confidently relax by using the first exercise, try gradually shortening the exercise until you feel able to relax whenever you need to.

Before you start:

- Decide when and where you will practise relaxation. Aim to develop a routine that is easy to stick with.
- Choose somewhere quiet, where you will not be disturbed.
- Make sure the room is not too hot or cold. You may want to dim the lights.
- Choose a time between meals when you are not too hungry or too full.
- Find a position which is comfortable for you. Ideally laying down, but this could also be sitting in a comfortable chair.

Breathing Exercise:

- Breathe slowly, through your nose. Try to use your stomach muscles. Your tummy should move up and down, not your chest.
- Keep your breathing regular. Do not take quick deep breaths as this can cause you to hyperventilate which will make you feel dizzy.
- Try laying your hands gently on your stomach. Feel your hands rise and fall with your breathing. This will show you that you are breathing properly.



Visual relaxation exercise

Think of an image that has positive memories for you, something calm and soothing.

- In your mind's eye, picture yourself part of that happy memory.
- If your memory is about being on holiday at the seaside, imagine yourself on a warm beach listening to the sound of sea.
- Find some music that reminds you of the sea. Play this while you picture the scene in your mind.

This simple relaxation technique focuses on your breathing and on your positive image:

1. Sit in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Think about deeply relaxing your muscles.
2. Begin at your feet and move slowly up to your face, relaxing your muscles as you go.
3. Become aware of your breathing. Breathe through your nose. Focus on your own, positive image and then breathe out through your mouth.
4. Try to remain calm and passive allowing relaxation to happen naturally in it's own time.
5. Do not dwell on negative thoughts or images if they occur, simply bring your mind back to your positive image.
6. Continue with this technique for 10 –15 minutes. Then, when you are ready to finish sit quietly with your eyes closed. Open your eyes after a few minutes. Take time to gather your thoughts before getting up.

Cued relaxation:

When you are able to achieve a relaxed state using the previous exercise, you can begin to try using cued relaxation during your day.

Find something that you can use as a cue, which you will see regularly.

You might use a picture on your wall, which you look at regularly. Every time you see the picture, it will remind you to relax.

This way, you will be reminded to practise relaxation several times each day.

There are many cues which you might use. Work out what catches your eye regularly throughout the day and use it as your reminder.

With time and practice, relaxation will become part of your daily routine. It is inevitable that you will experience anxiety and tension at times – this is normal. However, you should now have a better awareness of this and the skills to control it.



Muscular relaxation:

Find a comfortable place to sit. Then:

- Tighten all the muscles in your legs.
- Hold for a few seconds, noticing the tension.
- Let go and relax – take a deep, slow breath out at the same time.
- Notice how your legs feel loose, floppy and relaxed.
- Sit and enjoy feeling relaxed for a moment.
- Now do the same with your arms. Tighten muscles, hold for a second, and then let them go loose and relaxed. Taking a slow breath out.
- Repeat this with your stomach muscles.
- Push your shoulders down away from your head.

Gently turn your head to the right and then to the left before coming back to the centre.

Screw up your eyes and then raise your eyebrows as high as you can.

Remember different relaxation exercises will suit different people.

Experiment and find out what suits you.

Practise the one you like best. With practice, it will become easier to relax and you will be able to manage your stress by relaxing almost automatically.

Leading a relaxed lifestyle

Making basic changes to the way you live can help you relax.

1. Give yourself time to take a break – relax, stretch, read a book.
2. Try not to rush around.
3. Make a point of thinking about your posture. Drop your shoulders, relax your jaw and unclench your fists.
4. Make sure your daily routine includes pleasurable activities.
5. Try to take regular, gentle exercise.



If you need more help or advice about anxiety please ask your doctor to refer you to the Community Adult Assessment and Rehabilitation Service (CAARS) and an Occupational Therapist will be able to see you.

Other useful information can be found at:

www.lltff.com

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/

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