

# understanding



paranoia

## **Understanding paranoia**

This booklet is for anyone who experiences paranoia. It explains possible causes and how you can access treatment and support. It also provides information on how you can help yourself and guidance for friends and family.

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### What is paranoia?

Paranoia is thinking and feeling as if you are under threat even though there is no (or very little) evidence that you are. Paranoid thoughts can also be described as delusions. There are lots of different kinds of threat you might be scared and worried about.

Paranoid thoughts could also be exaggerated suspicions. For example, someone made a nasty comment about you once, and you believe that they are directing a hate campaign against you.

👉👉 *In paranoia, your fears become amplified and everyone you meet becomes drawn into that web. You become the centre of a threatening universe.* 🗨️🗨️

### What kind of things can you be paranoid about?

Everyone will have a different experience of paranoia. But here are some examples of common types of paranoid thoughts.

You might think that:

- you are being talked about behind your back or watched by people or organisations (either on or offline)
- other people are trying to make you look bad or exclude you
- you are at risk of being physically harmed or killed
- people are using hints and double meanings to secretly threaten you or make you feel bad
- other people are deliberately trying to upset or irritate you
- people are trying to take your money or possessions
- your actions or thoughts are being interfered with by others
- you are being controlled or that the government is targeting you.

You might have these thoughts very strongly all the time, or just occasionally when you are in a stressful situation. They might cause you a lot of distress or you might not really mind them too much.

👉👉 *I find it really hard to trust people as my head tells me they're out to get me.* 👉👉

Most people have paranoid thoughts about threats or harm to themselves but you can also have paranoid thoughts about threats or harm to other people, to your culture or to society as a whole.

### What counts as a paranoid thought?

Paranoid thoughts are to do with your ideas about other people and what they might do. It can be difficult to work out whether a suspicious thought is paranoid or not. People might disagree on what is a paranoid thought. Someone else (a friend, family member or doctor) might say your thoughts are paranoid when you don't think they are.

People may think about risks in different ways and believe different things are good or bad evidence for suspicious thoughts. People might also believe different things based on the same evidence.

Ultimately you have to decide for yourself.

👉👉 *Another jogger looked across at me as he overtook me and my anxiety immediately crystallised around his glance. 'Are you following me?' I shouted. I had the thought he was an agent hired by my employer to track my movements.* 👉👉

Suspicious thoughts are more likely to be paranoid if:

- no one else shares the suspicious thought
- there's no definite evidence for the suspicious thought
- there is evidence against the suspicious thought
- it's unlikely you would be singled out
- you still have the suspicious thought despite reassurance from others
- your suspicions are based on feelings and ambiguous events.

### What about justified suspicions?

Not all suspicious thoughts are paranoid. We all have good reason to be suspicious sometimes. Justified suspicions are suspicions that you have evidence for. For example, if lots of people have been mugged on your street, it is not paranoid to think that you might be mugged too and take care when walking through your area. Justified suspicions can help keep you safe.

Evidence and justification can be lots of different things. Your evidence might be an individual experience but it might be a history of persecution or discrimination. For example, if you are a young black man and you know that police in London target more young black men for stop and search, it's not paranoid to feel under greater threat of a stop and search yourself. But it would almost certainly be paranoid to think that the police are controlling you.

It can sometimes be difficult to work out whether your thoughts are paranoid or whether they are justified suspicions. Our information on what counts as a paranoid thought (see p.5) and helping yourself (see p.13) can help you decide.

### Is paranoia a mental health problem?

Paranoia is a symptom of some mental health problems and not a diagnosis itself.

Paranoid thoughts can be anything from very mild to very severe and these experiences can be quite different.

This depends on how much:

- you believe the paranoid thoughts
- you think about the paranoid thoughts
- the paranoid thoughts upset you
- the paranoid thoughts interfere with your everyday life.

Lots of people experience mild paranoia at some point in their lives – may be up to a third of us. This is usually called non-clinical paranoia. These kind of paranoid thoughts often change over time – so you might realise that they are not justified or just stop having those particular thoughts.

At the other end of the spectrum is very severe paranoia (also called clinical paranoia or persecutory delusions). If your paranoia is more severe then you are more likely to need treatment. (See 'What treatment is available?' on p.16).

Paranoia can be one symptom of these mental health problems:

- paranoid schizophrenia – a type of schizophrenia where you experience extreme paranoid thoughts
- delusional disorder (persecutory type) – a type of psychosis where you have one main delusion related to being harmed by others
- paranoid personality disorder.

### How could paranoia affect me?

You might do or feel specific things as a result of your paranoid thoughts. These things can feel helpful at the time – but in the long term they could make your paranoia worse.

#### Safety behaviours

Safety (or safety seeking) behaviours are things that make you feel safe. For example you might avoid certain people or places, stay indoors a lot or wear protective clothing.

#### Behaviour towards other people

If you think someone is threatening you or wants to harm you in some way, you may behave suspiciously or aggressively towards them. You might push them away or decide that you are better off without them.

But this means that people might start to treat you differently. They might try to avoid you too. It might become harder to make or keep friends. This can make you feel as if your beliefs were justified in the first place.

👉👉 *Paranoia can appear to make people very selfish, and self-absorbed.* 👉👉

Safety behaviours can sometimes start to act as evidence for your paranoid thoughts. You might think that you are safe because you do those things and then do them even more. But this means you don't have a chance to try different ways of dealing with scary situations or to test your beliefs and see if they are justified or not.

Talking therapies can help you test your thoughts and practise dealing with scary situations and people (see 'What treatment is available?' on p.16). This can be very uncomfortable at first but the therapist should offer you a lot of support and take things at a pace that you can manage.



## Isolation

Paranoid thoughts can make you feel alone. You might feel as if no one understands you, and it can be hard when other people don't believe what feels very real to you.

If you avoid people or stay indoors a lot, you may feel even more isolated. You might find it helpful to read our information on talking to someone you trust (see 'How can I help myself?' on p.13).

👉👉 *Paranoia is a very lonely and very frightening illness – it strips people of their confidence.* 👉👉

## Worry and sadness

You might feel anxious and worried about your paranoid thoughts or feel low and sad about what they mean and how they affect your life.

Anxiety and low mood might make you more vulnerable to paranoid thoughts. Research has also shown that people who are more anxious or have low mood are more distressed by paranoid thoughts. It might help to read our information on anxiety and depression.

### Paranoia and stigma

There are a lot of misunderstandings about what it means to experience paranoia. It's important to remember that you aren't alone and you don't have to put up with people treating you badly. Here are some options for you to think about:

- Show people this information to help them understand more about paranoia.
- Talk to other people who experience paranoia by going to a support group – or setting one up for yourself.
- Share your experience with others. Our website publishes blogs and video blogs (mental health selfies).
- Know your rights. Our Legal Line can give you information about your legal rights. (Call 0300 466 6463, between 9am and 6pm, Monday to Friday).
- Take action with Mind. See the campaigns page on our website for details of the different ways you can get involved with helping us challenge stigma.

👉👉 *What really disturbed me was the strength of the panic that felt like being stabbed. I realised this thought was paranoid but it was the idea that I could think something as bizarre as this that was terrifying to me.* 👉👉

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## Why do I experience paranoia?

No one knows exactly what causes paranoia. There are lots of theories and different people will have different explanations for their own experiences. It's likely to be a combination of things.

Researchers have identified some general risk factors – these are things that could make paranoid thoughts more likely:

- Having confusing or unsettling experiences or feelings that you can't easily explain.
- The way you feel – if you are anxious or worried a lot or have low self-esteem and expect others to criticise or reject you.
- The way you think – if you tend to come to conclusions quickly, believe things very strongly and don't easily change your mind.
- If you are isolated.
- If you have experienced trauma in the past.

There are lots of more specific things that may play a role in causing paranoid thoughts. Sometimes this could be because they make you more likely to experience the risk factors above. For example, taking drugs or lack of sleep might make you have more confusing or unsettling experiences.

- Life experiences. You are more likely to experience paranoid thoughts when you are in vulnerable, isolated or stressful situations that could lead to you feeling negative about yourself. If you are bullied at work, or your home is burgled, this could give you suspicious thoughts which could develop into paranoia.
- Experiences in your childhood may lead you to believe that the world is unsafe or make you mistrustful and suspicious of others. They may also affect your self-esteem and the way you think as an adult. You could contact the National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC) if you need support for dealing with childhood abuse (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

## Understanding paranoia

- **External environment.** Some research has suggested that paranoid thoughts are more common if you live in an urban environment or community where you feel isolated from the people around you rather than connected to them. Media reports of crime, terrorism and violence may also play a role in triggering paranoid feelings.
- **Mental health.** If you experience anxiety, depression or low self-esteem, you may be more likely to experience paranoid thoughts – or be more upset by them. This may be because you are more on edge, worry a lot or are more likely to interpret things in a negative way. Paranoia is a symptom of some mental health problems. Many people experience paranoid delusions as part of an episode of psychosis.
- **Physical illness.** Paranoia is sometimes a symptom of certain physical illnesses such as Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease, strokes, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. Hearing loss can also trigger paranoid thoughts in some people.
- **Lack of sleep.** Lack of sleep can trigger feelings of insecurity and even unsettling feelings and hallucinations. Fears and worries may develop late at night.
- **The effects of drugs and alcohol.** Drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, alcohol, ecstasy, LSD and amphetamines can all trigger paranoia. Certain steroids taken by athletes and weightlifters can also lead to symptoms of paranoia. Some insecticides, fuel and paint have also been associated with paranoia.
- **Genetics.** Research has suggested that your genes may affect whether you are more likely to develop paranoia – but we don't know which ones.

### What is the relationship between paranoia and anxiety?

The relationship between paranoia and anxiety is complicated. A paranoid thought could be described as a particular type of anxious thought. Both are to do with reacting to the possibility of some kind of threat.

Anxiety can be a cause of paranoia. Research suggests that it can affect what you are paranoid about, how long it lasts and how distressed it makes you feel. Paranoid thoughts can make you feel anxious.

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## How can I help myself?

If you are experiencing paranoid thoughts – or think that you might be – there are things you can do to help yourself cope. You may choose to try them on their own or alongside treatment (see 'What treatment is available?' on p.16).

### Keep a diary

You may find it helpful to keep a diary recording, for example:

- what your paranoid thoughts are
- how you feel about them
- how often you think about them
- your sleep
- other life events.

You could do this in a notebook or use an app or online tool like MoodPanda (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22). You might find it helpful to give the thoughts a number from 1–10 to show how strongly you believe them and how distressing you find them.

## Understanding paranoia

This may help you:

- identify what might be triggering your paranoia and when you are most likely to have paranoid thoughts
- recognise paranoid thoughts when they occur and help you question and challenge them
- think about what has been helpful in the past.

Once you have a better understanding of your triggers, you can try to take steps to avoid them.

### Questioning and challenging paranoid thoughts



Asking yourself these questions can help you work out whether your suspicious thoughts are paranoid or justified.

- Would other people think my suspicions are realistic?
- What would my best friend say?
- Have I talked to other people about my worries?
- Is it possible I have exaggerated the threat?
- Is there any evidence for my suspicions that can't be questioned?
- Are my worries based on events that could be viewed in different ways?
- Are my worries based on my feelings rather than definite evidence?
- Is it likely that I would be singled out above everyone else?
- Is there any evidence against my beliefs?
- Is it possible that I'm being oversensitive?
- Do I still feel suspicious even though other people have reassured me that there is no reason to be?

### Look for support around you

- Talk about your thoughts with someone you trust. You may find that talking about your thoughts with a trusted friend or family member can reduce stress and help you to question and challenge paranoid thoughts. You could share this information with them, particularly the information for friends and family (see 'What can friends and family to

do help?' on p.19). If you don't have someone you feel you can trust, the Samaritans are there for anyone in distress 24 hours a day (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

 *I've found it becomes easier and less straining on yourself once you share your thoughts with someone else.* 

- Stay in touch. Try to keep in contact with people around you and make time for activities that make you feel good. Avoiding family and friends and giving up on hobbies and interests you enjoy can make you feel isolated in the long run.
- Try peer support. Peer support brings together people who've had similar experiences to support each other. You can access peer support online or go to a support group in your local area. You can find peer support groups for paranoia through The National Paranoia Network or Rethink (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

You can also contact your local Mind to help you find peer support near you. See our web pages on peer support and our peer support directory for more information.

## Learn to relax

- Try mindfulness. There is some evidence that mindfulness can help reduce mild paranoia. (See Mind's booklet 'Making sense of mindfulness' for more information).
- Manage your stress. This can help you deal better with pressure and build resilience. (See Mind's booklet 'How to manage stress' for more information).
- Try some relaxation techniques. Relaxation can help you look after your wellbeing when you are feeling stressed, anxious or busy.

### Look after yourself

- Try to get enough sleep. Sleep can give you the energy to cope with difficult feelings and experiences.
- Think about your diet. Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels.
- Try to take some exercise. Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing.
- Doing practical things like gardening, cooking or making things can help you feel more connected to the world around you. Being outside in green space can help you feel more in touch with your surroundings.

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## What treatment is available?

If your paranoid thoughts are causing you distress then you may want to seek treatment. You may also be offered treatment for paranoia as part of your treatment for a mental health problem.

The first step is usually to visit your GP. Our booklet on 'Seeking help for a mental health problem' can help you speak to your doctor about your mental health.

### Talking treatments

Talking treatments can help you understand your experiences and develop coping strategies to deal with them.

#### Cognitive behavioural therapy

The most common form of talking treatment for paranoia is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). During CBT, you will examine the way you think and the evidence for your beliefs and look for different possible



interpretations. CBT can also help reduce worry and anxiety that may influence and increase feelings of paranoia.

👉👉 *I did a lot of CBT, examining negative thoughts and trying to compare them with evidence to the contrary. It helped to talk through this process with others who were more able to see alternative 'evidence' or ways of looking at things.* 👉👉

### Other talking treatments

Many other forms of talking treatments are available, including:

- psychodynamic therapy
- counselling
- family (or systemic) therapy.

Talking treatments are free on the NHS, but waiting times may vary. You may choose to see a therapist privately if you can afford it. The British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) have a list of trained and registered therapists (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

### Finding a therapist you trust

Paranoid thoughts might make it more difficult to trust your therapist or to talk about how you feel. This can sometimes make therapy more difficult. It's important to try to find a therapist who you feel comfortable with. It can also help if you feel able to tell them about your concerns.

You may also find it useful to agree with your therapist what you will do if your paranoia gets worse. For example, you may decide to pause sessions until you feel able to start again.

### Arts therapies

Arts therapies can help you express how you are feeling in different ways. They can be helpful if you are having difficulty talking about your experience.

### Medication

If you have a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia or delusional disorder, you are likely to be offered an antipsychotic drug to reduce your symptoms. Antipsychotics may reduce paranoid thoughts or make you feel less threatened by them.

If you have anxiety or depression, your GP may offer you antidepressants or minor tranquillisers. These can help you feel less worried about the thoughts and may stop them getting worse.

### Paranoia and treatment using virtual reality

If you feel paranoid, you may avoid places or people that make you feel threatened – or use techniques to help you feel safe. New research is investigating whether virtual reality can be combined with cognitive therapy to help you to practise entering situations you are scared about and find out what happens if you don't use your usual techniques to help you feel safe.

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## What can friends and family do to help?

*This section is for friends and family who want to support someone they know with paranoia.*

If you have a relative or friend who may be experiencing paranoid thoughts, it can be difficult to know how to help. You might feel unsure of how to react, particularly if you don't agree with the beliefs they are expressing.



- Consider if their beliefs might be justified. It's easy to dismiss thoughts as paranoid if you don't agree with them or they don't match your experience. It's even easier if your loved one has experienced other paranoid thoughts or delusions in the past. But it's important to check that you're not making assumptions.
- Consider if there is a basis for their beliefs. Even if you feel that their thoughts aren't justified, it's worth remembering that many paranoid thoughts will have developed from anxieties about a real situation. Try to explore whether there is a basis for their fears. This can help both of you understand how the thoughts have developed.

👉👉 *The most helpful thing for me is to be taken seriously. On some level I know my beliefs can't be real, yet to me they are utterly terrifying. Treating the fear as very real, even if you can't go along with my reasons for the fear, is so important.* 👉👉

- Talk openly. Paranoid beliefs can make people feel isolated but talking about them can help reduce stress. You might find that your point of view reassures them and gives them a different perspective.

## Understanding paranoia

- Don't dismiss their fears. Even if you don't agree that they are under threat or at risk, try to understand how they are feeling. It's important to recognise that the feelings are very real, even if you feel the beliefs they are based on are unfounded.
- Focus on their feelings. Focus on the level of distress they are feeling and offer comfort. It's possible to recognise their alarm and acknowledge their feelings without agreeing with the reason they feel that way.

 *[It helps to] deal with the agitation by focusing on the feelings... and giving general comforting phrases such as 'All is well, there is nothing to worry about, you are safe.' Providing distraction activities can also help to break the cycle of paranoia.* 

- Support them to seek help. You can't force anyone to get help if they don't want it, so it's important to reassure your loved one that it's ok to ask for help, and that there is help out there. Our booklet 'How to seek help for a mental health problem' has a special section with information on how friends and family can provide support.
- Respect their wishes. Even if you feel that you know what's best, it's important to respect their wishes and don't try and take over or make decisions without them.
- Know how to get help in an emergency. If your loved one hasn't been able to talk to you about their experiences, they may become very unwell before you realise they need help. If you are worried that your family member or friend is becoming very unwell or experiencing a mental health crisis, you could suggest that they use their crisis plan (if they have one).

- Look after yourself too. Seeing someone you care about experiencing paranoia can be distressing or even frightening. Our booklet 'How to cope as a carer' can help you look after yourself too.

👉👉 *Looking after someone with paranoia is incredibly draining... having the same conversations day in day out. I learnt to be very clear and concise in my conversations with my father, to be very boundaried and always do what I said I was going to do, leaving no room for misinterpretation.* 👉👉

## Useful contacts

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### British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel. 0161 705 4304

web: babcp.com

Has a list of accredited behavioural and cognitive therapists.

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### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 01455 883 300

web: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

For details of local practitioners.

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### Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk

Elefriends is a friendly, supportive online community for people experiencing a mental health problem.

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### MoodPanda

web: moodpanda.com

Online app to help you track your mood and thoughts.

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### National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

tel. 0808 801 0331

web: napac.org.uk

Support for survivors of abuse in childhood.

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### National Paranoia Network

tel. 0114 271 8210

web: nationalparanoianetwork.org

Information and support for people who experience paranoid thoughts.

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### Rethink Mental Illness

web: rethink.org

Information and support for people experiencing mental health problems.

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### Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

24-hour helpline: 116 123

(freephone)

email: jo@samaritans.org

web: samaritans.org

A 24-hour telephone helpline for people struggling to cope.

## Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit [mind.org.uk/shop](http://mind.org.uk/shop) or phone 0844 448 4448 or email [publications@mind.org.uk](mailto:publications@mind.org.uk)

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fax: 020 8522 1725  
web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

# Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

**Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393**  
**info@mind.org.uk**  
**mind.org.uk**

