

# HOW TO MANAGE FOOD ALLERGY *anxiety*

Clinical psychologist  
**Dr Mieke Garrett**  
provides some expert  
advice on how to keep  
anxiety about food  
allergy in check.

**A**nxiety is an emotional state that all humans experience to varying degrees. We have inbuilt mechanisms to detect danger and produce fear when confronted with a real threat in the here and now, motivating us to take some action (fight, flight or freeze) in order to survive.

Anxiety is a result of our frontal lobes providing us with the ability to think ahead, predict things that might go wrong in the future and plan for them accordingly. When coming across a dark alleyway, we might feel a sense of anxiety at the potential danger down it, and choose to avoid it.

Anxiety is a normal and expected emotion that arises from having to deal with very real threats to ourselves and our children, such as food allergies, and some anxiety is useful, as it motivates us to take measures to keep ourselves safe.

## **Problematic anxiety**

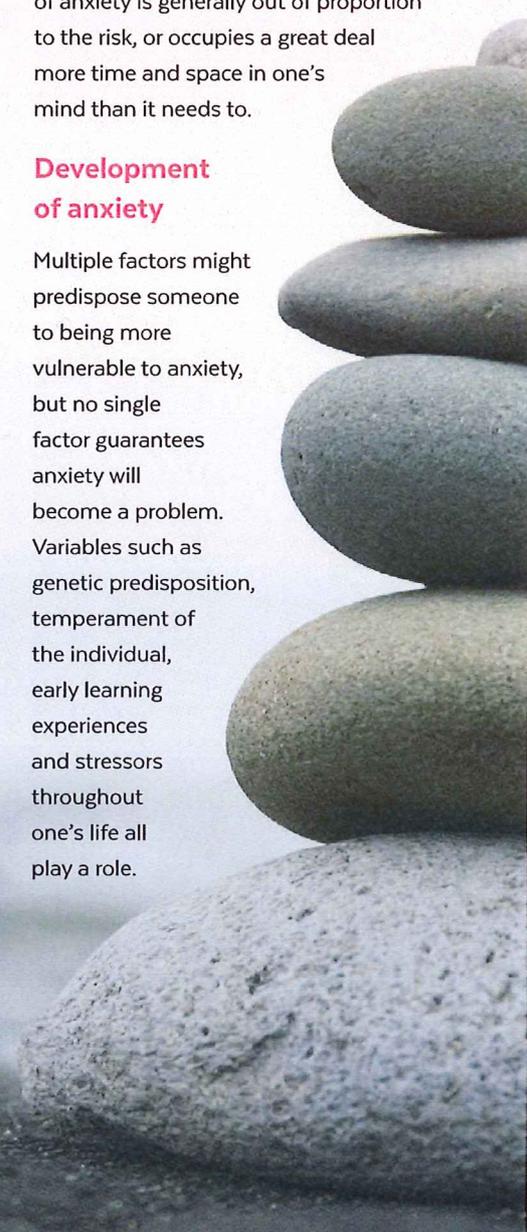
Some people experience greater degrees of anxiety than others, and experience difficulties such as:

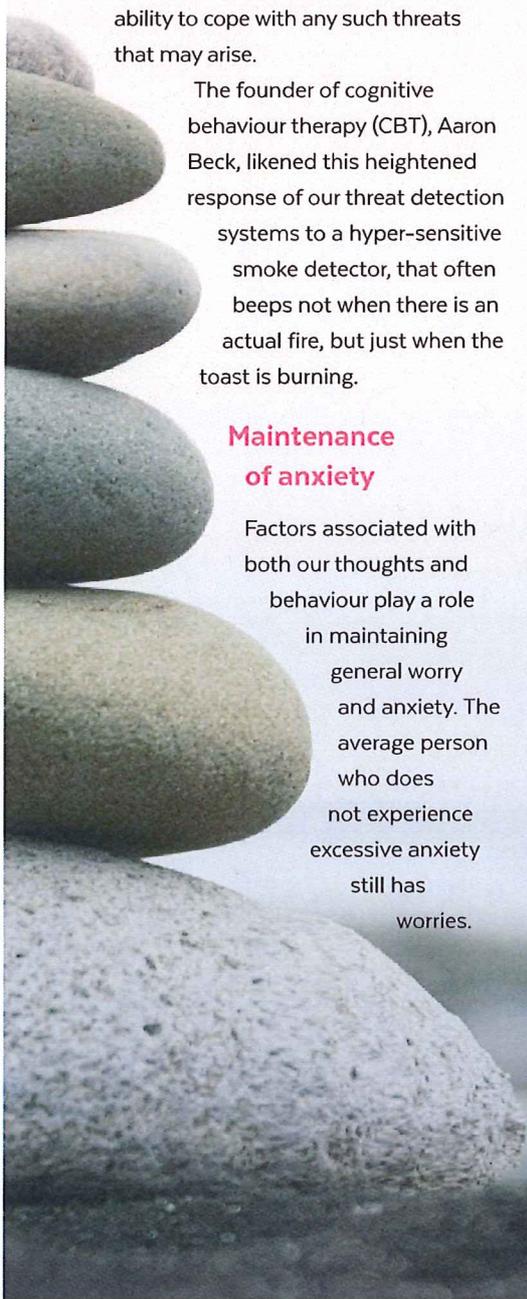
- a sense of constant and uncontrollable worry that tends to snowball
- avoidance of situations that provoke anxiety
- disturbed sleep
- a range of unpleasant physical sensations that seem unremitting
- low mood.

This is often associated with poorer quality of life, significant distress and impairment in the ability to function optimally in day-to-day life. The degree of anxiety is generally out of proportion to the risk, or occupies a great deal more time and space in one's mind than it needs to.

## **Development of anxiety**

Multiple factors might predispose someone to being more vulnerable to anxiety, but no single factor guarantees anxiety will become a problem. Variables such as genetic predisposition, temperament of the individual, early learning experiences and stressors throughout one's life all play a role.





People who experience heightened anxiety are often hyper-alert to danger. They regularly scan the environment for threats, and as a result often notice them more or interpret neutral situations as more threatening. When looking into the future, they often overestimate the threat of things going wrong, and, in doing so, imagine catastrophic scenarios and outcomes. They also tend to underestimate their ability to cope with any such threats that may arise.

The founder of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), Aaron Beck, likened this heightened response of our threat detection systems to a hyper-sensitive smoke detector, that often beeps not when there is an actual fire, but just when the toast is burning.

### Maintenance of anxiety

Factors associated with both our thoughts and behaviour play a role in maintaining general worry and anxiety. The average person who does not experience excessive anxiety still has worries.

However, they tend to see them as much less important or significant, and thus they respond to them differently.

The person struggling with anxiety often sees a worry as something they need to attend to and do something with, which often leads them to either paying it a lot of attention to try and solve it, or trying to get rid of it all together. When people respond to their worries with attention, the worries grow, and often snowball into further worries in the form of “what ifs”.

Trying to solve a worry is like trying to put out a growing fire by blowing on it. Because it hasn't happened yet, there is no way to solve it (although sometimes you can put a plan in place for what you will do if it happens and take appropriate measures to mitigate the risk). If by some chance you are able to solve a worry, a new worry will just come and take its place.

Conversely, trying not to have a worry in your mind is akin to asking you not to think of a pink elephant, ever. As soon as those words are in your awareness, you'll find that the more you try to ensure they absolutely don't come into your mind again, the more they will persist. Acknowledging worries but not engaging excessively with the unsolvable ones is key.

With regards to behaviour, avoidance is one of the hallmarks of anxiety. It makes sense that we don't want to face situations we perceive as threatening; however, when we are overestimating the threat of a situation, avoidance keeps anxiety going by not providing us with the opportunity to disprove our fears, and as the situation remains unknown, the fears grow. Avoidance also means that the opportunity to develop coping strategies, confidence and a sense of control is diminished.

Conversely, some people deal with anxiety in the opposite way — by ignoring it altogether and taking unnecessary and dangerous risks in not wanting anxiety to take over their lives. Ignoring real risks and failing to manage them and adequately plan for them is not only dangerous but equally unhelpful to managing anxiety.

### Anxiety and food allergies

Anxiety is common with food allergies. By their very nature, food allergies require hypervigilance, scanning for threats and danger, and taking many precautions to keep ourselves or our children safe in what are often unclear, uncertain or unpredictable situations. Getting it wrong can have serious consequences, and this thought is undeniably terrifying for parents. Even if the chance of a reaction is very small, many parents don't want to take any risk at all with their children, for good reason.

## Managing food allergy-related anxiety

It is challenging but important to continually work on adopting a healthy awareness of your levels of anxiety, whether it is in proportion to the actual level of risk, and whether worries result in overall helpful actions and outcomes. A balance needs to be struck and maintained between accepting that some anxiety is necessary in order to keep safe, and recognising when it becomes problematic and impairs quality of life and functioning excessively.

Observing how others in similar situations are handling similar threats can be useful to check your own anxiety against, especially if you are able to observe a range and notice what different responses and techniques others are employing.

Parents should continue to educate and seek training in allergy management, and instil the requisite knowledge in their children, so that they have the confidence to safely manage situations that may arise. Understanding how to read food labels, when to check with others, as well as education about anaphylaxis and its management, and what to do in an emergency are all important tools for parents and children alike.

Appropriate cautions and measures should always be put in place to keep your children safe, and, beyond this, some acceptance is required of the fact that we can't control every aspect of the environment at all times, even though we wish we could.

Factors in the environment also add to the challenges in managing allergies and anxiety. While there is some excellent advice and support available, many parents report difficulties to negotiate. These include evolving research, differing advice and approaches between health professionals, dismissal of concerns and having to play a strong advocacy role for their children, invalidation by support people, the constant presence of food in social situations, general education levels and attitudes among the public with regards to allergies, and difficulties understanding food labelling, particularly what a "may contain traces of" label actually means.

Yet, while all parents share an inextricable love for their children, the level of hypervigilance and anxiety varies considerably between them. To some degree, factors associated with the allergy (number of allergies, severity, previous adverse reactions, co-existing conditions such as asthma, etc) play a role, but importantly, so do parents' attitudes towards allergies and their tolerance of anxiety.

Some parents tolerate food with a "may contain traces of" warning, some may eat out at restaurants and some frequent social gatherings; others are not willing to take the risk on some or all of these. In managing our own anxiety, to some degree we set the platform for how our children will perceive risk and develop a sense of confidence and control over managing it too.

The aim should be to make children aware of the risks through calm, factual statements, but not unnecessarily terrify or overwhelm them, and focus on instilling confidence that they can manage situations that arise. Taking gradual steps to reduce avoidance of social situations and gain experience in navigating them is important.

When engaging online, it's important to be mindful of which articles and information are helpful to share. Often, we think sharing articles of allergy-related deaths overseas is helpful in raising awareness, but in reality, posting these links and focusing on the death itself, and narrowing in only on the threats similar to the everyday parent's situation (such as an EpiPen not working), contributes to the ongoing sense of hypervigilance prevalent in anxiety. Generally, such stories are alarming and don't help in any practical way.

If an article must be shared, it is ideal to preface it with key learning points that other parents can take away. Deaths from anaphylaxis are rare, and usually due to a combination of factors, such as how much of the allergen was ingested, poorly-controlled asthma on the day, delayed administration of adrenaline for whatever reason, and body position (e.g., getting up and walking too soon).



Be aware of the tendency for cognitive bias — that is, to attend selectively to information that confirms your fears and dismiss alternative, more balanced evidence.

The fact is that deaths related to severe allergic reactions are rare.

Researchers at Imperial College in London reviewed data internationally and calculated that for every person with food allergy, the risk of dying from anaphylaxis is 1.81 in a million. The risk a food-allergic child will die from a food-allergic reaction is 3.25 in a million. This is lower than the rate of sudden unexpected deaths from any other non-violent cause, which is estimated at about three in 100,000 children per year. However, because they trigger our worst fears, any case has a strong emotional impact and is much more salient in our minds.

Allergy management can be incredibly stressful. Ensure you have practical and emotional support; reach out to others and connect with people who understand and who have helpful ways of managing their challenges. Find ways to take breaks for yourself where you can. It can be anxiety provoking and guilt inducing to take time out, but it's essential for your own well-being and ability to cope. Go for a walk, do yoga, book a massage, have a warm drink outside, just do something that gives you a small break.

If an accident happens and your child has a reaction to something, it's natural to feel very upset, and sometimes guilty. However, allow yourself compassion; you are doing your very best for your child, and need to look after yourself too following a scary or traumatic experience, rather than blaming yourself.

### Helpful resources

Fellow allergy parents have often recommended the "Thai" book series by Jackie Nevard, which provides a helpful way of educating children on food allergy management, including in social situations, and does a nice job of normalising it too.

For general worry management in children, the book *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety* by Dawn Huebner is excellent. It's particularly aimed at children 6-12 years of age.

The Centre for Clinical Interventions, run by psychologists in Australia, has some excellent self-help resources for adults in the consumer resources section, particularly the *What? Me Worry!?* module. Find out more at [cci.health.wa.gov.au](http://cci.health.wa.gov.au).

If you are concerned about your own stress, anxiety or mood levels, or your children's, seek help from a healthcare professional. Your GP can be a good first port of call for accessing services, or you can contact a clinical psychologist in private practice directly. <sup>A</sup>



Dr Mieke Garrett is a clinical psychologist working in private practice in Auckland. She is the mother of a wonderful and lively nearly two-year-old boy who is allergic to egg and some tree nuts.

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