

mind hk



Understanding paranoia

認識妄想症

Mind HK was founded and is jointly supported by Mind UK and the Patient Care Foundation
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This booklet is for anyone who experiences paranoia. It explains what paranoia is and what may cause it. It describes self-help techniques, treatment options and how friends and family can help.

此小冊子解釋了妄想症的定義與其成因，並描述了一些自救的方式和治療方法。患者的親朋戚友亦可以透過這份小冊子了解如何協助患者。

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What is paranoia?

甚麼是「妄想症」？

Everybody experiences suspicious or irrational thoughts from time to time. These fears are described as paranoid when they are exaggerated and there is no evidence that they are true.

There are three key features of paranoid thoughts. If you have paranoia, you may:

- fear that something bad will happen
- think that other people or external causes are responsible
- have beliefs that are exaggerated or unfounded.

Generally speaking, if you are experiencing paranoia, you will feel a sense of threat and fear.

There are different types of threat or harm that you may feel paranoid about. You may feel you are at risk of:

- psychological or emotional harm – thinking somebody is bullying you, spreading rumours about you, talking about you behind your back
- physical harm – believing somebody trying to physically hurt or injure you, or even trying to kill you
- financial harm – thinking another person is stealing from you, or is damaging your property or tricking you into giving away your money.

It could be one person you feel threatened by, or it may be a group of people, an organisation, an event or an object.

“I have lived in fear for so many years. I always expect someone to knock on my door and when I open it, [that] they [will] attack me. And when I go out, I think I will be beaten up by people.”

Many people experience mild paranoid thoughts at some point in their lives, for example, thinking that people are looking at them or talking about them behind their backs. These types of thought are relatively common and are closely related to anxiety.

“I have a female friend who is often suspicious and untrusting of people... In her case, it seems as if the problem is based on heightened anxiety.”

“Our relative often assumed that the general conversation was aimed at him when it was about someone entirely different. [Or that] someone in a different room was talking about him when it was actually the neighbour's TV.”

More severe paranoid thoughts are not as common, but have a more significant impact on your day-to-day life. You are likely to feel alarmed, and possibly terrified, isolated and exhausted. Severe paranoid thoughts are sometimes called persecutory delusions, because the person experiencing them feels they are being persecuted.

“I experienced paranoia as part of transient episodes of psychosis... These involved very cosmic thoughts, for example that the world was about to end, or that international war was imminent.”

“[My friend] says he is sometimes aware of the thoughts of some previous neighbours of his (some years ago and over three miles away) who have a continuing negative attitude to him. He won't accept this is anything to do with his schizophrenia, a diagnosis he accepts, but believes [it] is controlled by his medication.”

It is possible to recover fully from paranoia. This might mean that you no longer have any paranoid thoughts. Or it may mean that you still experience them, but learn coping strategies so they no longer disrupt your life or cause you distress.

"I struggled with paranoia for a long time and it was very distressing. But with time and the help of my therapist, I have learned to deal with it and life is a lot brighter now."

What is a paranoid thought?

It is difficult to identify what a paranoid thought is. Sometimes your thoughts and beliefs may seem irrational, but that does not mean you have paranoia.

Many people have certain cultural or unusual beliefs, such as believing in witchcraft, aliens or conspiracy theories, that are not shared by the general population. However, unless such beliefs cause you to feel threatened and scared, they would not be considered to be paranoia.

Similarly, what may be a paranoid thought for one person may be a rational reaction for another. This largely depends on the context of the thought, and your own life experience. For example, if someone has a loving and supportive family, feeling that a family member wants to hurt them may be considered irrational and paranoid.

However, if someone has difficult relationships with their family and has been threatened by a relative in the past, feeling that a family member wants to hurt them may be a rational reaction to a difficult situation. Similarly, if someone feels that they are being spied on by the government, this may seem irrational and paranoid to the people around them. However, if that person is a political refugee who has come to this country after being persecuted by their government, it may be understandable that they feel they are being watched.

What are the common signs of paranoia?

「妄想症」有甚麼常見的徵狀？

Depending on what paranoid thoughts you are having, they can cause you to feel a wide range of emotions. You may feel:

- anxious and stressed
- scared
- confused
- frustrated or angry
- mistrustful of other people and organisations
- victimised or persecuted
- threatened
- disbelieved or misunderstood
- alone and isolated
- tired – from worrying all the time.

“I find it really hard to trust people as my head tells me they’re out to get me.”

If your paranoia is part of a psychotic disorder, you may also hear voices or see things that other people don’t.

Paranoia may begin to have an impact on your behaviour and day-to-day life. You may find you are:

- finding it difficult to trust other people and maintain relationships
- showing physical symptoms of stress or anxiety – shaking, sweating or having panic attacks
- finding it difficult to concentrate or continue with day-to-day tasks, such as using public transport or carrying out paid work
- sleeping very little or not at all
- not making time to look after yourself, including not eating regularly or not taking care of your personal appearance
- isolating yourself in order to avoid situations that frighten you, or because you are worried other people might judge you.

“Being paranoid is a daily issue for me... When I’m unwell I think everyone wants to hurt me. I get paranoid that people are waiting outside my flat and my feelings then take over completely [so I can’t go out].”

You may be aware that your thoughts are paranoid and not based in fact, or it may be that you feel that your views or beliefs are real. Having paranoid thoughts can be very isolating and distressing, as other people are unlikely to share your views or beliefs. You may feel you have to cope with fears alone and that nobody else understands what you are experiencing.

Over time, paranoia can lead to additional mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. (See Mind's booklets Understanding anxiety and panic attacks and Understanding depression for more information.)

How is paranoia diagnosed?

如何診斷「妄想症」？

Paranoia is not a diagnosis in its own right. If you experience paranoid thoughts or feelings, this will usually be seen as a symptom of another mental health problem. The most common diagnoses related to paranoia are:

Paranoid schizophrenia

偏狂型精神分裂

Paranoid schizophrenia is a type of schizophrenia that features extreme paranoid thoughts. If you experience paranoid schizophrenia, you may hear voices as well as having paranoid thoughts, and these voices may make your feeling of paranoia worse. You may also feel the voices are mocking or threatening you, which is likely to cause you further distress. You might also believe that you are an important or powerful person, such as a religious figure or a member of royalty, and you may feel that this is why you are being persecuted.

Delusional or paranoid disorder

幻想型妄想症

If you experience delusional or paranoid disorder, you are likely to develop one particular paranoid idea which may be complex in nature. This may

put you in conflict with those around you. You are more likely to contact the police or a lawyer than a psychiatrist for help, as you will feel certain your persecution is real.

Paranoid personality disorder

妄想型人格障礙

You may be diagnosed with paranoid personality disorder if you have been having paranoid feelings for some time, perhaps for several years or even decades. If you have received this diagnosis, you are likely to feel very suspicious and find it difficult to trust other people. You might feel that other people are plotting against you, and will find it difficult to accept the suggestion that these feelings might be exaggerated or unfounded.

Other diagnoses

其他有可能的診斷

If you experience paranoid feelings alongside other symptoms, you may receive one of the following diagnoses, depending on what the other symptoms are:

- bipolar disorder
- severe anxiety
- severe depression
- postnatal psychosis
- schizoaffective disorder.

You can find more information about these diagnoses in Mind's Understanding... booklets.

What causes paranoia?

「妄想症」有甚麼的成因？

No one knows exactly what causes paranoia. It's likely be caused by a combination of different factors. There are many theories about what

causes it and different people will have different explanations for their own experiences.

Life experiences

人生經驗

You are more likely to experience paranoid thoughts when you are in vulnerable, difficult or stressful situations – for example if you are lonely or by yourself a lot, or if you have low self-esteem. Difficult life events such as losing a job, a relationship break-up or the death of someone close to you may have the effect of making you feel very isolated. These events might make you turn inwards, and cause you to feel insecure and under threat. If you are bullied in your workplace, or if your home is burgled, this can also form the root of suspicious thoughts that then develop into paranoia.

External environment

外在環境

Some research has suggested that paranoid thoughts are more common if you live in an urban environment or a community, where you feel isolated from the people around you rather than connected to them. Media reports of crime, terrorism, violence and other social issues might also play a role in triggering paranoid feelings. High levels of stress might also put you at greater risk.

“When I lived in the USA before the end of the Cold War, the nuclear stand-off with the USSR preyed on my thoughts in a way that it probably wouldn't have [done] had I lived there my whole life and been more used to it.”

Anxiety and depression

焦慮與抑鬱

In some people, anxiety and depression can act as triggers for paranoid thoughts. If you are anxious, you are more likely to be on edge and may feel more fearful than normal. Depression can lower your self-esteem, and make you more inclined to interpret other people's attitudes or intentions towards you negatively. (See Mind's booklets Understanding anxiety and

panic attacks and Understanding depression for more information.)

Childhood experiences

兒時回憶

Events in your childhood may lead you to believe that the world is unsafe and that people are untrustworthy. This can affect the way you think as an adult. If you experienced abuse or neglect as a child, this can also trigger paranoia, because you are likely to feel mistrustful and suspicious of others.

Physical illness

病患纏身

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 for some people

Lack of sleep

失眠

If you have trouble sleeping, this can have a big impact on paranoia. Fears and worries may develop late at night when you are alone with your thoughts, and not getting enough sleep can trigger feelings of insecurity. If you are feeling frightened as a result of your paranoia, you are also less likely to sleep, which can turn into a negative cycle and make your paranoia worse. (See Mind's booklet How to cope with sleep problems for more information.)

The effects of drugs and alcohol

濫藥酗酒

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. (See Mind's

booklet Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs.)

How can I help myself?

我可以如何自理?

There are certain things you can try doing yourself to help you address your paranoia. These techniques can be used along with other treatments and support from friends, family and professionals.

“The things that help me include talking to my very supportive mental health team, using Elefriends [Mind’s online support community], and listening to music whilst thinking about fun times I’ve had with friends”

Look after your health

照顧自己的健康

If you are able to improve your overall wellbeing, you are likely to feel more grounded. This will help you cope better with any fears you may be experiencing. (For more information, see Mind’s booklet How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing.)

- Get enough sleep – learning to relax before bed, making sure you do enough exercise during the day to tire you out physically and establishing a sleep routine can all help (see Mind’s booklet How to cope with sleep problems).
- Avoid drugs and alcohol – stopping or reducing your use of drugs and/or alcohol will help you feel more in control of your thoughts, and make it easier to rationalise your feelings (see Mind’s booklet Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs).
- Eat well – eating regular healthy meals can make a big difference to your overall sense of wellbeing (see Mind’s leaflet Food and mood).

Try a mindfulness technique

嘗試靜觀訓練 (Mindfulness)

If your paranoia is related to anxiety or stress, you might find a

mindfulness or meditation technique helpful. Mindfulness is a way of paying more attention to the present moment and learning to focus on your own thoughts and feelings, and on the world around you. It can help you improve your mental wellbeing, calm your feelings and stop you becoming overwhelmed by them. (See Be Mindful in 'Useful contacts' on p.22 for more information and details of groups in your area.)

Keep a diary

寫日記

You might find it helpful to track your thoughts and feelings for a short time. Doing this may help you identify what might be triggering your paranoia. It can also be a good way of releasing negative thoughts, so they don't get to you as much.

At the end of each day, or every few days, write down the thoughts that have been troubling you and make a note of how many times a day they worry you.

Try and look for patterns in the thoughts you have recorded. You might find it helpful to give them a number from 1–10 to show how strongly you believe them, and how distressing you find them.

As you build up a picture of how your thoughts are affecting you, you can start to consider which things might be acting as triggers. For example, you may find that you are more likely to have paranoid thoughts after an argument, or when you are particularly tired.

Learn to recognise and challenge paranoid thoughts

學習如何認知和對抗妄想性思想

Self-help techniques associated with cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) can be helpful in coping with paranoid thoughts. However, these techniques can be difficult to use on your own, so you may need support from a professional therapist to help you. (See 'Talking treatments' on

p.17 for more information.)

Here are some CBT techniques that you might find helpful

Consider your reactions

認識自己對妄想性思想的反應

You might find it helpful to consider a few different situations you have been in where you have experienced paranoid thoughts, and try to write down how the paranoia developed in a chain of events. This can help you see how paranoid thoughts begin to develop and recognise patterns. For example, the chain of events may look something like this:

- My sister said she would call on Saturday.
- By 5pm she hadn't called.
- She must be ignoring me.
- By 8.30pm there was still no call – she can't like me.
- My whole family hate me – none of them have called today.
- I phoned a friend and they didn't answer.
- Convinced no one likes me.
- Worried that they are plotting together to make me upset.
- Read old emails and started to see double meanings in them.
- Became increasingly scared and suspicious

Begin to assess evidence

開始觀察證據

Once you have built an awareness of your thoughts and how they develop, you can start to challenge your thinking. It may help you to make a list of what you feel the 'evidence for the thought' is, and then compare it to a list of what the 'evidence against the thought'

As you build the evidence against your paranoid thoughts, you might find it useful to keep some of the most helpful statements on a piece of paper in your wallet, or as a note on your phone. This way you can refer to

them if you start to feel anxious. For example, the statement might say, 'Sometimes I don't answer calls and it doesn't mean I hate the person.'

"I found it helpful to write things down at first, before I was more able to internalise the process [and do it in my head]"

Talk about your thoughts with someone you trust

與信任的人傾訴

Some people find that talking their thoughts through with a trusted friend or family member can reduce stress and help them rationalise their paranoia.

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

However, you have the right to choose who you talk to, and how much you wish to tell them. If you are experiencing severe paranoia, you might not have much control over what you say. You may find yourself telling people more about your thoughts and feelings than you would normally feel comfortable with. If you notice that you tend to share things that you feel unhappy about at a later point, you might find it helpful to discuss how you feel with the person when you are feeling calmer. That way they will know what you are comfortable talking about.

Go to a support group

參與互助小組

There are a growing number of support groups offering people a chance to talk to others who have had similar experiences to them. The National Paranoia Network (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22) is working to develop groups for people who experience paranoid thoughts. You might also find online support helpful. There are many groups available, such as Mind's Elefriends community. If you do use online support, it's that you know how to do this safely. (For more information, see Mind's booklet How to stay safe online and Elefriends in 'Useful contacts' on p.22.)

What treatments are available?

「妄想症」有甚麼治療的方法？

If you are concerned about your feelings or behaviour and want to seek professional help, the first step is usually to visit your GP. Your GP will discuss your options with you, and may refer you to a specialist if you need additional support. Your views and wishes should always be taken into account when deciding on your treatment.

Talking treatments

言語治療

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a talking treatment that can be helpful for coping with paranoid thoughts. CBT involves examining your thinking patterns and the evidence you have for your beliefs. It then aims to help you find alternative interpretations to the ones that are causing you problems. (See Mind's booklet Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy.)

"I used 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."

Many other forms of talking treatments are available, including psychotherapy, family therapy and group therapy. Although they have different underlying ideas, they generally involve talking over personal experiences in detail, and exploring feelings. (See Mind's booklet Making sense of talking treatments for more information.)

If you experience paranoia, you might be finding it difficult to trust people. This means it's important to find a therapist that you feel comfortable with. You may also find it useful to agree with your therapist what you

will do if your paranoia worsens. For example, you may decide to pause sessions until you feel able to start again.

Medication

藥物治療

Medication is not normally prescribed to treat paranoid thoughts. However, you may be offered medication to relieve other symptoms you are experiencing, such as depression, anxiety or psychosis (seeing, hearing or feeling things, or holding unusual beliefs that other people don't). If you are prescribed any medication, your doctor should give you an explanation of what it is for, possible side effects and any alternative treatment options. Make sure you are aware of the possible benefits and negatives before you start.

Antidepressants and minor tranquillisers

If you are anxious or depressed, your GP might recommend antidepressants or minor tranquillisers. While many people find these drugs helpful in controlling the symptoms of paranoia, both types of treatment can cause side effects. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of antidepressants* and *Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers* for more information.)

Antipsychotics

If you have received a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, or delusional or paranoid disorder, you are likely to be offered an antipsychotic drug to reduce your symptoms. Antipsychotics may reduce paranoid thoughts, hallucinations, incoherent speech and thinking, and confusion. The drugs can also control anxiety and serious agitation, make you feel less threatened, and also reduce violent, disruptive and manic behaviour. However, not everybody finds antipsychotics helpful, and many people experience unwanted side effects, such as problems with movement, weight and sexual function. (For more information, see Mind's booklet *Making sense of antipsychotics*.)

Complementary and alternative therapies

輔助性和另類治療的方法

Some people find complementary and alternative therapies such as

hypnotherapy, massage and acupuncture help to manage the anxiety and upsetting feelings associated with paranoia. However, this type of treatment doesn't work for everyone, and there is little clinical evidence to demonstrate that these treatments have any effect. If you do choose to use a complementary or alternative therapy, make sure you understand it fully, and that you see an accredited practitioner.

Arts therapies

藝術療法

Arts therapies are a way of using the arts – for example, music, painting, clay, dance, voice or drama – to express yourself in a therapeutic environment. They are carried out with the help of a trained therapist. The therapist helps you understand the art that you create in relation to your experiences and state of mind. (See Mind's online booklet Making sense of arts therapies for more information.)

What other support is available?

有甚麼其他對「妄想症」的輔助？

If you are finding it difficult to cope, you may be offered further support to help. The following support services are available to help treat paranoia. Community-based mental health care

Crisis care

危機照顧

Crisis services such as crisis resolution teams and crisis houses can help if you are in crisis. You can also make an emergency appointment with your GP or visit A&E and ask to see a psychiatrist. (See Mind's booklet The Mind guide to crisis services for more information.)

Social care

社區協助

Social care can help you carry out day-to-day tasks if you find these

difficult. This could include a range of different things, for example, help with managing money or improving relationships, help with transport to attend appointments or services, or help with benefits and housing applications. You can ask your GP or CMHT to refer you to social services, or you can contact them directly to ask for an assessment. (See Mind's online booklet *The Mind guide to community-based mental health and social care*).

Voluntary services

義工服務

Charities and voluntary organisations may be able to provide support, such as drop-in sessions, employment services or counselling.

Hospital admission

入院治療

Inpatient care in psychiatric wards or hospitals is normally only considered if you are unable to cope in your home. You may find that a stay in hospital allows you to get the structured support you need in order to recover from the effects of paranoia. However, if your paranoia is this severe you may feel extremely scared and that you are under considerable threat, which might make going into hospital a difficult experience.

What can friends and family do to help?

親朋戚友又有甚麼可以做？

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

If you have a relative or friend who is experiencing paranoia, you may find it to be alarming and upsetting. You might feel unsure of how to offer support, particularly if you don't agree with the thoughts that they are expressing. Feeling this way is understandable and, although it might seem frightening at first, there are ways you can offer support.

Don't dismiss their fears 不要不理會他們的恐懼

Even if you don't agree that your relative or friend is under threat or at risk, try to understand how they are feeling. It's important to recognise that the feelings they have are real to them, even if you feel their beliefs are unfounded. Focus on the level of distress or alarm that they are experiencing and offer them reassurance and comfort. It is possible to recognise your friend or family member's alarm and acknowledge their feelings without agreeing with the reason they feel this way.

"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."

Consider if there is a basis for their beliefs 尋找他們的想法的根源

Many paranoid thoughts will have developed from a real situation. Working with your friend or family member, try exploring whether there is basis for their fears. This can help both of you understand how the fearful thoughts have developed, and can also be useful in discovering where the thoughts and fears they have are improbable. You may find your point of view reassures the person, and reinforces to them the possibility that what they fear may not actually be happening.

Respect privacy and boundaries 尊重私隱和界限

It is important to remember that your friend or relative has a right to their own boundaries. They might choose to share with you only a small amount of detail about their thoughts, or they might disclose a lot of their fears. The amount that they tell you might change, depending on how they are feeling. Accept the boundaries that they feel comfortable with, and be aware that they might feel embarrassed about things they have said when they are unwell.

Get support for yourself

自我幫助

It is important to look after yourself as well as looking after the person experiencing paranoia. It can be very distressing to see someone you care about behaving differently from usual, and putting themselves at risk. You might find it helpful to have counselling or go to a support group. This can provide the opportunity to talk about your feelings, what the relationship is like for you and what you can do to look after yourself. (For more information and advice for carers, see Mind's booklet *How to cope as a carer*, and Carers UK in 'Useful contacts' on p.22.)

Useful Contacts

有用的聯絡

The Mental Health Association of
Hong Kong
香港心理衛生會
tel: 2528 0196
web: www.mhahk.org.hk

Amity Mutual Support Society
恆康互助社
tel: 2332 2759
web: www.amss1996.org.hk

Suicide Prevention Services
生命熱線
tel: 2382 0000
web: www.sps.org.hk

United Centre of Emotional Health &
Positive Living
聯合情緒健康教育中心
tel: 2349 3212
web: www.ucep.org.hk

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong
Kong
港撒瑪利亞防止自殺會
tel: 2389 2222
web: 2389 2222

Further Information

Mind HK was founded and is jointly supported by Mind UK and the Patient Care Foundation. At the moment Mind HK is limited to website support but with donations we hope to expand the work that is done. Volunteers welcome to contact:

mentalhealth@patientcarefoundation.com.hk

Mind Hong Kong 是由 Mind UK 及 Patient Care Foundation Hong Kong 聯合協辦的機構。在現階段我們只能提供有限度的網上支援。假若有足夠的捐款，我們會進一步擴大服務範圍。如有興趣參與義工團隊，請聯絡: mentalhealth@patientcarefoundation.com.hk