

It is of no surprise that people with chronic illness tend to experience a higher degree of general anxiety than their healthy cohorts. Being constantly under the relentless stress of the many aspects of illness depletes one's ability to cope with ordinary, 'every-day' stresses that are part and parcel of everyone's life.

We all have a finite, limited capacity for stress. Imagine a bucket placed underneath a tap. In healthy folk, the tap may only be turned on intermittently, sometimes slowly, sometimes faster, but generally provided we make sure to 'empty the bucket' from time to time, there will be no ongoing problem.

Being chronically ill is like having the bucket under a permanently leaking tap; at times it may only be dripping, at others, water may be pouring out, filling the bucket rapidly before anyone has the chance to empty it.

So it is inevitable in either case, that the capacity of the bucket is going to be reached quickly and that most of the time, it may well be full virtually to the brim, without the added intermittent influx of water from life's 'ordinary' stresses on top, which are, of course, going to cause an overflow!

When that happens, we find ourselves struggling to cope; however, before that point, we are wrestling with a constant anxiety and stress level as the water in the bucket is always rising.

Another way of looking at it is to consider it as a bit like being in a leaky boat, having to constantly bail out water, with the ongoing worry of sinking if we don't bail out fast enough. Bailing out is tiring both physically and emotionally and that means that we become less efficient as time goes on, and the problems start to get worse.

One of the important points about dealing with anxiety is to recognise that this is not a weakness of character nor is it a 'neurosis', although some of the manifestations of anxiety may make us feel out of control, or perhaps behaving in ways we would normally feel a degree of embarrassment about: anxiety can lead to a number of varied problems, including phobias, obsessive/compulsive behaviour, agitation, irritability, insomnia etc.

It can also be a feature in conditions such as depression.

However, in this article, there is not the space to deal with all these specific problems and I will be looking instead at the more generalised aspects of anxiety.