

mind hk



Understanding anxiety and panic attacks

理解焦慮症和「恐慌突

Mind HK was founded and is jointly supported by Mind UK and the Patient Care Foundation
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This booklet is aimed at anyone who experiences anxiety. It looks into the causes of anxiety, its effects and what to do to reduce it to a manageable level. It also provides some information about severe anxiety, including panic attacks and panic disorder. Friends and relatives of people who experience anxiety may also find it useful.

此小冊子的目的是幫助任何經歷焦慮「恐慌突襲」的人。它會深入探討焦慮的成因，其影響以及減低其影響的方法。它亦會提供關於嚴重焦慮症的資料，例如應對突如其來的「恐慌突襲」和驚恐症的方法。受焦慮困擾的人的家人朋友亦可以通過此小冊子對焦慮症有更深認識。

Contents

目錄

What is anxiety? 甚麼是焦慮症?	4
What are the symptoms of anxiety? 焦慮症有甚麼症狀?	6
What causes anxiety? 焦慮症的成因是甚麼	8
What anxiety disorders are there? 恐慌症有甚麼種類	10
What is a panic attack? 甚麼是「恐慌突襲」?	12
How can I help myself manage anxiety? 我應該怎麼處理焦慮情緒?	15
What treatment can I get for anxiety? 焦慮症有甚麼治療方法?	18
What medication is available for anxiety? 有甚麼藥物可以幫助處理焦慮情緒?	21
How can friends and family help? 家人朋友可以怎樣幫忙?	22
Useful contacts 有用連結	25

What is anxiety?

甚麼是焦慮症？

Anxiety is a word we use to describe feelings of unease, worry and fear. It incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something. Although we usually find it unpleasant, anxiety is related to the 'fight or flight' response – our normal biological reaction to feeling threatened (see 'What is the 'fight or flight' response?' on p.5).

We all know what it's like to feel anxious from time to time. It's common to feel tense, nervous and perhaps fearful at the thought of a stressful event or decision you're facing – especially if it could have a big impact on your life. For example:

- sitting an exam
- going into hospital
- attending an interview
- starting a new job
- moving away from home
- having a baby
- being diagnosed with an illness
- deciding to get married or divorced.

In situations like these, it's understandable to have worries about how you will perform, or what the outcome will be. For a brief period you might even find it hard to sleep, eat or concentrate. Then usually, after a short while or when the situation has passed, the feelings of worry stop.

When does anxiety become a mental health problem?

Because anxiety is a normal human experience, it's sometimes hard to know when it's becoming a problem for you – but if your feelings of

anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, it can be overwhelming.

For example:

- You might find that you're worrying all the time, perhaps about things that are a regular part of everyday life, or about things that aren't likely to happen – or even worrying about worrying.
- You might regularly experience unpleasant physical and psychological effects of anxiety (see 'What are the symptoms of anxiety?' on p.6), and maybe panic attacks (see 'What is a panic attack?' on p.12).
- Depending on the kind of problems you experience, you might be given a diagnosis of a specific anxiety disorder (see 'What anxiety disorders are there?' on p.10).

What is the 'fight or flight' response?

Like all other animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from dangerous, life-threatening situations. When you feel under threat your body releases hormones, such as adrenalin and cortisol, which help physically prepare you to either fight the danger or run away from it. These hormones can:

- make you feel more alert, so you can act faster
- make your heart beat faster to carry blood quickly to where it's needed most.

Then when you feel the danger has passed, your body releases other hormones to help your muscles relax, which may cause you to shake. This is commonly called the 'fight or flight' response – it's something that happens automatically in our bodies and we have no control over it. In modern society we don't usually face situations where we need to physically fight or flee from danger, but our biological response to feeling threatened is still the same.

"Going out of the house is a challenge because I [have a] fear

of panicking and feel that I'm being watched or judged. It's just horrible. I want to get help but I'm afraid of being judged".

If anxiety is affecting your ability to live your life the way you'd like to, it's worth thinking about ways to help yourself (see 'How can I help myself manage anxiety?' on p.14), and what kind of treatments are available (see 'What treatment can I get for anxiety?' on p.18).

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

焦慮症有甚麼症狀？

If you experience anxiety, you might find that you identify with some of the physical and psychological sensations in the table below. Anxiety can feel different for different people, so you might also experience other kinds of feelings, which aren't listed here.

Physical sensations:

- nausea (feeling sick)
- tense muscles and headaches
- pins and needles
- feeling light headed or dizzy
- faster breathing
- sweating or hot flushes
- a fast, thumping or irregular heart beat
- raised blood pressure
- difficulty sleeping
- needing the toilet more frequently, or less frequently
- churning in the pit of your stomach
- you might experience a panic attack (see 'What is a panic attack?' on p.13)

Psychological sensations:

- feeling tense, nervous and on edge
- having a sense of dread, or fearing the worst
- feeling like the world is speeding up or slowing down
- feeling like other people can see you're anxious and are looking at you
- feeling your mind is really busy with thoughts
- dwelling on negative experiences, or thinking over a situation again and again (this is called rumination)
- feeling restless and not being able to concentrate
- feeling numb

"For me, anxiety feels as if everyone in the world is waiting for me to trip up, so that they can laugh at me. It makes me feel nervous and unsure whether the next step I take is the best way forward."

What are the long-term effects of anxiety?

焦慮有什麼長遠影響？

If you have felt anxious for a long time or you're frequently anxious, you may experience additional effects in your mind and body, such as:

- problems sleeping (see our booklet *How to cope with sleep problems* for more information)
- depression (see our booklet *Understanding depression* for more information)
- a lowered immune system, which might make you more susceptible to certain physical illnesses
- smoking or drinking a lot, or misusing drugs to cope (see our online booklet *Understanding the mental health effects of street drugs* for more information). If you're experiencing problems with street drugs or alcohol, Turning Point can provide more information and support (see *Useful contacts* on p.26).
- a change in your sex drive.

You might also have difficulty with everyday aspects of your life, such as:

- holding down a job
- developing or maintaining relationships
- simply enjoying your leisure time.

What causes anxiety?

焦慮症的成因是甚麼？

It's hard to know why some people experience anxiety as a mental health problem and others don't. If you worry more than others it could also just feel like part of your personality – or it could be a mixture of these things. Sometimes you might not know why you feel anxious at all, and it might not seem to have any obvious cause.

Past or childhood experiences

過往經歷或童年創傷經驗

If something distressing happened to you in the past, you might feel anxious about facing similar situations again in case they stir up the same feelings of distress.

“It all started back in high school when I was physically and verbally bullied. It was a very traumatic time for me and sometimes still is [traumatic] to think about.”

Feeling anxious could also be something you learned early on in life. For example, if your family or main carers tended to see the world as hostile or dangerous, you may have learned to feel the same way.

Everyday life and habits

日常生活和習慣

Your lifestyle and the way you spend your time day to day can affect the way you feel. For example, the following experiences can all contribute to anxiety:

- exhaustion or stress (see our booklet *How to manage stress*)
- long working hours (see our booklet *How to be mentally healthy at work*)
- pressure at home, at work, or on your course if you're studying (see our booklet *How to cope with student life*)
- housing problems (see our online booklet *The Mind guide to housing and mental health*)
- money problems (see our web pages on money and mental health).

"I have recently realised that I spend money when anxious, which in turn makes me feel anxious about how much I'm spending."

Diet

飲食習慣

Your diet can affect your mood on a day-to-day basis, and some foods can mimic and trigger symptoms of anxiety, such as drinking caffeine, eating lots of sugar or a poor diet generally. (See our online booklet *The Mind guide to food and mood* for more information.)

Physical and mental health

心理和生理健康

Your physical health can have an impact on your mental wellbeing. For example, if you have a long-term physical health condition, or experience chronic pain, this might make you more vulnerable to experiencing mental health problems such as anxiety or depression (see our booklet *Understanding depression* for more information).

Similarly, if you are experiencing other mental health problems, such as depression, this can also make you more vulnerable to experiencing problems with anxiety. (See our booklet Understanding mental health problems for more information about different mental health conditions.)

Drugs and medication

各種藥物

If you are taking prescription medication or street drugs, including alcohol, you might find that they can affect your mental health. For example, you might experience anxiety as a side effect of:

- certain medication for mental health problems (see our web pages on psychiatric medication for more information)
- certain medication for other health problems, such as steroids or some anti-malaria medication
- street drugs or alcohol (see our online booklet The Mind guide to street drugs and mental health).

Genetics

基因遺傳

There is some evidence to suggest some people might inherit a genetic tendency to be more anxious than others.

What anxiety disorders are there?

恐慌症有甚麼種類？

The most common anxiety disorders are:

- generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)
- panic disorder
- obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- phobias
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

You might not have, or want, a diagnosis of a particular disorder – but it might still be useful to learn about these different diagnoses to help you think about your own experiences of anxiety, and consider options for support.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

If you have felt anxious for a long time and often feel fearful, but are not anxious about anything specific that is happening in your life, you might be diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder. Because there are lots of possible symptoms and effects of anxiety (see ‘What are the symptoms of anxiety?’ on p.6) this can be quite a broad diagnosis, meaning that the problems you experience with GAD might be quite different from the problems another person experiences, even though you have the same diagnosis.

If you don’t know what is wrong with you, how do you know how to fix it? For me, actually being diagnosed with anxiety and panic disorder came as a relief! It meant that I wasn’t imagining the awful symptoms I’d been experiencing.

Panic disorder

驚恐症

If you experience panic attacks that seem completely unpredictable and you can’t identify what triggers them, you might be given a diagnosis of panic disorder. (See ‘What is a panic attack?’ on p.12 for more information.)

Experiencing panic disorder can mean that you feel constantly afraid of having another panic attack, to the point that this fear itself can trigger your panic attacks.

“Never knowing when I was going to get a panic attack was the worst feeling in the world”

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

強迫症

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a diagnosis you might be given if your anxiety leads you to experience both:

- obsessions – unwelcome thoughts, images, urges or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind
- compulsions – repetitive activities that you feel you have to do.

(See our booklet Understanding obsessive-compulsive disorder for more information on what OCD is, and what treatments and support are available.)

Phobias

恐懼症

A phobia is an intense fear of something, even when that thing is very unlikely to be dangerous to you. If you have a phobia, your anxiety may be triggered by very specific situations or objects.

(See our booklet Understanding phobias for more information on what phobias are, and what treatments and support are available.)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

創傷後壓力症

If you develop strong feelings of anxiety after experiencing or witnessing something you found very traumatic, you might be given a diagnosis of PTSD. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares about the traumatic event, which can feel like you're re-living all the fear and anxiety you experienced during the actual event.

(See our booklet Understanding post-traumatic stress disorder for more information on what PTSD is, and what treatments and support are available.)

What is a panic attack?

甚麼是「恐慌突襲」？

A panic attack is an exaggeration of your body's normal response to fear,

stress or excitement. It is the rapid build-up of overwhelming physical sensations, such as:

- a pounding heartbeat
- feeling faint
- sweating
- nausea (feeling sick)
- chest pains
- feeling unable to breathe
- shaky limbs, or feeling like your legs are turning to jelly
- feeling like you're not connected to your body.

"I could feel all these physical symptoms building inside me, literally filling every part of my body until I felt completely light-headed and disembodied. I felt like I couldn't breathe, I just wanted to get out, go somewhere else, but I couldn't because I was on a train."

During a panic attack you might feel very afraid that:

- you're losing control
- you're going to faint
- you're having a heart attack
- you're going to die.

"My teeth would chatter uncontrollably and my whole body would tremble, I'd hyperventilate and cry with panic as the feeling that I was going to fall unconscious was so convincing."

When do panic attacks happen?

「恐慌突襲」會在甚麼時候出現？

It's different for different people. You might have a good understanding about situations or places that are likely to trigger an attack for you, or you might feel that your attacks come without warning and happen at random.

Panic attacks can also come in the night while you're asleep, and wake you up. This can happen if your brain is very alert (due to anxiety), and interprets small changes in your body as a sign of danger. Experiencing a panic attack during the night can be particularly frightening, as you may feel confused about what's happening, and are helpless to do anything to spot it coming.

"I can't sleep due to panic attacks and nightmares. When I fall asleep within an hour I am up, soaked, heart racing and shaking."

How long do panic attacks last?

「恐慌突襲」會維持多久？

Most panic attacks last for between 5 and 20 minutes. They can come on very quickly, and your symptoms will usually peak within 10 minutes. Sometimes you might experience symptoms of a panic attack which last for up to an hour. If this happens you are probably experiencing one attack after another, or a high level of anxiety after the initial panic attack.

How often might I have panic attacks?

「恐慌突襲」出現的次數有多頻繁？

Again, it's different for different people. You might have one panic attack and never experience another, or you might have attacks once a month or even several times a week.

What can I do about panic attacks?

我應該怎麼處理「恐慌突襲」？

Having a panic attack can be a truly terrifying experience, but there are things you can do:

- For practical suggestions about how to manage anxiety and panic attacks, see 'How can I help myself manage anxiety?' on p.14.

• You might also find it helpful to read our information ‘What treatment can I get for anxiety?’ on p.18.

How can I help myself manage anxiety?

我應該怎麼處理焦慮情緒？

A common – and natural – response to anxiety is to avoid what triggers your fear, so taking any action might make you feel more anxious at first. It can be difficult, but facing up to how anxiety makes you feel can be the first step in breaking the cycle of fear and insecurity.

If you experience anxiety or panic attacks there are many things you can do to help yourself cope.

Talk to someone you trust

和你信任的人傾訴

Talking to someone you trust about what’s making you anxious can help. You may find that they have encountered a similar problem and can talk you through it. It may be that just having someone listen to you and showing they care can help in itself.

“Getting it off my chest seems to help relieve some of the pressure.”

Try a breathing exercise

嘗試呼吸練習

You may find a breathing exercise helps you to manage anxiety and feel calmer.

Breathe... always remember to breathe. Take time to inhale.

It’s the simplest thing, but is forgotten in panic attacks.

Gently breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, keeping the pace slow and regular. Slowly tense then relax all the muscles in your body, starting at your toes and working up to your head. Afterwards just take some time to be still and focus on how your body feels.

Try shifting your focus

嘗試轉移焦點

You may find it helpful to shift your focus or distract yourself from the anxiety you are feeling. Look at a flower, a picture or something that you find interesting or comforting. Really notice the details, the colours and any smells or sounds.

“I have fiddle toys like little puzzles, stress ball etc. to keep my hands ... and mind busy.”

Listen to music

聽音樂

Listening to music you find peaceful or you enjoy can help you to feel calmer.

“I made upbeat playlists... put my headphones on, lie on my bed and close my eyes – lose myself in the music.”

Try reassuring yourself

嘗試安慰自己

You may find it helpful to tell yourself that the symptoms you experience are actually caused by anxiety – it is not really dangerous, and it will pass. This can help you feel calmer and less fearful of future attacks.

Physical exercise

做運動

You may find that physical exercise can help you manage anxiety and panic attacks. Going for a walk or a run can help you get some time to yourself to think things over, away from everyday stresses.

“I find going for a walk great, even if I can’t go far. I walk

around the park and eat my lunch outside.”

If you're not able to do physical activities outdoors, or have limited mobility, try to think about what kinds of physical activities you can do indoors, such as exercising individual parts of your body at a time. (See our web pages on Physical activity and exercise for more information.)

Keep a diary

寫日記

You may find keeping a note of what happens each time you get anxious or have a panic attack can help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you, so you can think about how to deal with these situations in the future.

You could also try keeping a note of times when you are able to manage your anxiety successfully. This might help you feel more in control of the anxiety you feel.

“I keep a photo diary of all the things I've managed to do!
Makes me think “I can do this”. So when I go and sit in a café,
or go for a walk, I take a pic to record that I've done it, and look
back when I feel scared... it encourages me that maybe I can do
something [again] if I've done it before.”

Eat a healthy diet

均衡飲食

You may find it easier to relax if you avoid stimulants such as coffee, cigarettes and alcohol. Some people also find eating a healthy diet helps them to manage anxiety better (see our online booklet *The Mind guide to food and mood* for more information).

“Now I look for natural ways to control the panic and anxiety,
including meditation, exercise, breathing exercises, mindfulness and

diet. I have... cut out alcohol. Many think [drinking alcohol] helps with anxiety, but it actually makes it worse in the long run."

Complementary therapies

互補療程

Yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, massage, reflexology, herbal treatments, Bach flower remedies and hypnotherapy are all types of complementary therapy that you could try, and see if they work for you. You might find that one or more of these methods can help you to relax, sleep better, and manage the symptoms of anxiety and panic attacks.

"[For me, it's] a hypnotherapy CD. I laughed when my husband brought it home; now I use it myself – very calming."

Many pharmacies and health shops stock different remedies and should be able to offer advice.

Support groups

參加病友組織

A support group can give you the opportunity to share common experiences and ways of coping with others who are facing similar challenges. It can be comforting to know that you are not alone. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.25 for more information).

What treatment can I get for anxiety?

焦慮症有甚麼治療方法？

The most common treatments that your GP might offer you for anxiety and panic disorders are:

- talking treatments (see our booklet Making sense of talking treatments for more information)
- self-help resources (see p.19 for more information about self-help resources)
- certain types of medication (see 'What medication is available for anxiety?' on p.21).

Talking treatments

語言療法

Talking treatments (also known as counselling or therapy) are a process in which you work with a trained therapist to understand the causes of your anxiety, and to find strategies to manage it. There are lots of different types of talking treatments available, but the most commonly prescribed talking treatment for anxiety is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), because there is reliable evidence that it can be effective.

CBT is a particular type of talking treatment which aims to identify connections between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and help you develop practical skills to manage these more positively. (See our booklets Making sense of cognitive behavioural therapy and Making sense of talking treatments for more information.)

"I was diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder, depression and OCD traits. I had cognitive behavioural therapy for almost a year, which was very helpful."

To access self-help resources:

- You can buy self-help workbooks from various bookshops and specialist organisations' websites, such as No Panic (see 'Useful contacts' on p.26 for more information).
- Your local library might be able to order certain self-help books for you

to borrow for free.

- Your GP might be able to prescribe you self-help resources.

What other treatment options are there?

有其他治療方法嗎？

Applied relaxation therapy

鬆弛治療

Applied relaxation therapy involves learning how to relax your muscles in situations where you normally experience anxiety. Applied relaxation should be delivered by a trained therapist – usually for one session a week, over three to four months. Your GP is more likely to prescribe applied relaxation if you have generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) or agoraphobia (a kind of phobia).

Exercise on prescription

運動治療

GPs can prescribe exercise for a variety of problems, including mental health problems. If your GP prescribes you exercise, they should refer you to a qualified trainer who can help set up an exercise programme that suits you.

How can I access these treatments?

我可以如何接觸這些療程？

The Public Sector

The first step is usually to talk to your GP, who can make an assessment and prescribe treatments. In some cases you might be able to refer yourself for counselling.

The Private sector

As waiting lists for treatments can be long in the public sector you might want to consider seeing a therapist privately – but be aware that private therapists charge for

appointments.

Charities and local support groups

There are a range of charities and local support groups who offer talking therapies to their members. See "Useful contacts on pp 25)

What medication is available for anxiety?

有甚麼藥物可以幫助處理焦慮情緒?

As part of your treatment, your doctor might offer to prescribe you some medication. There are four types of medication which 'can be helpful in managing anxiety: antidepressants, beta blockers, tranquillisers (benzodiazepines), and pregabalin (an anticonvulsant drug).

Your doctor should also explain to you what the medication is for, and discuss any possible side effects.

Antidepressants

抗抑鬱藥

Antidepressants might help you feel calmer and more able to benefit from another treatment such as a talking treatment. However, antidepressants can sometimes cause unwanted side effects, such as increasing your anxiety or causing problems with sleeping.

Beta-blockers

β 受體阻滯劑

Beta-blockers, such as propranolol, can treat some of the physical symptoms of anxiety, including a rapid heartbeat, palpitations and a tremor (shaking). However, they are not psychiatric medication, so they won't reduce any of your psychological symptoms. (See our web pages about Medication for more information.)

Beta-blockers could be helpful in situations where you have to face

a particular phobia, such as going on an aeroplane (see our booklet Understanding phobias for more information on beta-blockers and the treatments available).

Tranquillisers

鎮靜劑

Your doctor might prescribe you tranquillisers (benzodiazepines) if your anxiety is very severe or disabling. Tranquillisers can't tackle the cause of your problems, but they can bring some relief until you have another form of treatment in place.

Tranquillisers should only be a temporary measure, because it's possible that you could become addicted to these drugs and have difficulty coming off them. (See our booklet Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers for more information about what they are, how they can help, possible side effects and withdrawal.)

Pregabalin (an anticonvulsant drug)

止神經痛藥

In some cases, such as if you have a diagnosis of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) (see p.10), your doctor may decide to prescribe you a drug called pregabalin (Lyrica). This drug is an anticonvulsant medication which is normally used to treat epilepsy, but is also licensed to treat anxiety.

How can friends and family help?

家人朋友可以怎樣幫忙？

This section is for friends and family who wish to support someone who is experiencing anxiety or panic attacks.

It can be really difficult when someone you care about is experiencing anxiety, but there are things you can do to help.

Empathise with them

對他長存同理心

Try to think about how you feel when you are anxious about something yourself, and how you prefer people to help you – for example, by remaining calm and allowing some time for your anxiety to pass. Even though your friend or family member's situation might be different, this might help you better understand how they feel when they're going through a bad time.

"Be kind, be non-judgemental... let us know it will pass, let us know you are there."

Try not to pressure them

嘗試不要給他們額外壓力

When someone you care about is experiencing a problem it's understandable to want to help them face their fear, or focus on leading them towards practical solutions. But it can be very distressing for someone to feel forced to face situations before they're ready – and it could even make them feel more anxious. By staying calm and listening to your friend or family member's wishes, you can support them to do what they feel comfortable with.

"[What helps me is] calmness, acceptance – not trying to dispel it with 'rational' or 'logical' argument."

Ask them how you can help

問他們你可以怎樣幫忙

Your friend or family member may already know how you can support them – for example by going through a breathing exercise together, or by calmly offering a distraction. By asking them what they need or how you

can help, you can support them to feel more in control themselves. You might also like to show them 'How can I help myself manage anxiety?' on p.14, to help them think about things they could try, and how you might be able to support them.

"Reminding me to breathe, asking me what I need..."

Learn about anxiety 加深對焦慮的認識

You might feel more able to help your friend or family member manage their anxiety if you learn more about the condition yourself. See Useful Contacts pp 25-26 to find organizations in Hong Kong that provide information for carers, friends and family members

Encourage them to seek help 支持他們尋找協助

If your friend or family member's anxiety is becoming a problem for them, you could encourage them to seek help. This could be support through their GP or a support groups. (see 'Useful contacts' on pp.25–26). You could ask them if they would like you to:

- help book an appointment
- attend an appointment with them
- explore sources of support together.

(See our booklet The Mind guide to seeking help for a mental health problem for more information.)

Look after yourself 照顧好自己

Supporting someone else can be stressful, so it's important to remember that your health is important too, and make sure to look after yourself.

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

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong
Kong

港撒瑪利亞防止自殺會

tel: 2389 2222

web: www.sbhk.org.hk

Suicide Prevention Services

生命熱線

tel: 2382 0000

web: www.sps.org.hk

HK FamilyLink Mental Health
Advocacy Association

香港家連家精神健康倡導協會

tel: 2144 7244

web: www.familylink.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

Institute of Mental Health Castle Peak
Hospital

青山醫院精神健康學院

tel: 2466 7350

web: www3.ha.org.hk

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