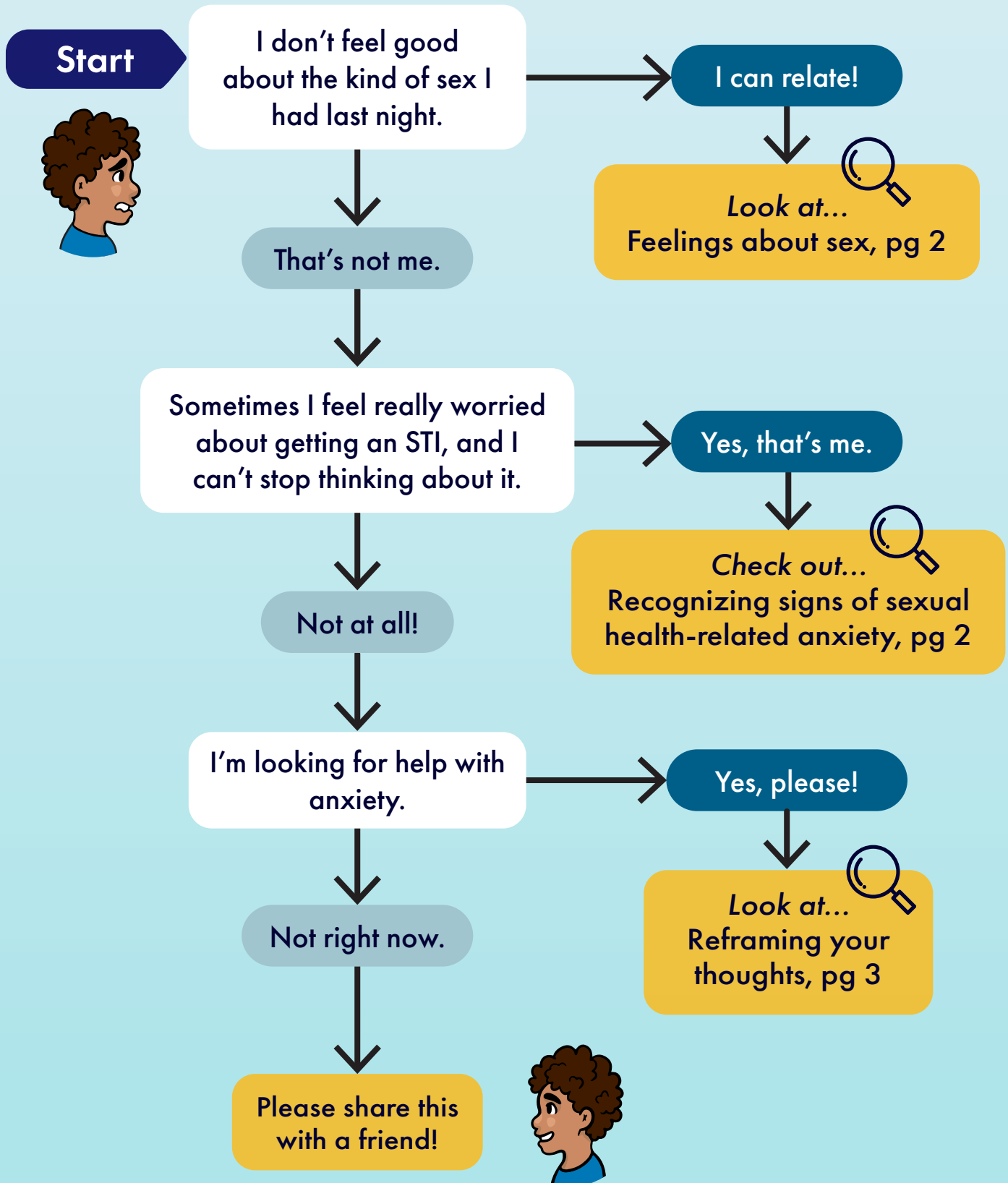


Sexual Health-Related Anxiety: What is it? What can I do?

Follow the path to find out more about sexual health-related anxiety!



Feelings about sex

Many of us learn that sex is shameful or embarrassing. This can come from messaging in the media, our families, or even from school. Sometimes these social pressures can cause you to feel anxious about the types of sex you like to have - or about having sex at all! For example, new sexual experiences may cause you to feel like you've done something "bad," leading to worries about getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or getting pregnant. This, in turn, can make it hard to bring yourself to go for an STI test. Remember: **sex-related stigma comes from someone else's judgment, and is not a reflection of your values and your right to make your own choices.**

2S/LGBTQ+* people often face prejudice, discrimination, and harassment about their sexuality and/or gender identity. This can cause feelings of embarrassment or shame and loss of self-esteem. It can also cause a person to worry about their sexual health. Feelings of shame around sexual behaviour are sometimes connected to feeling shame about being 2S/LGBTQ+. For example, if you don't feel comfortable with being 2S/LGBTQ+, you might feel like your non-heterosexual sex was: a mistake, a bad choice, riskier than it actually was, something to be secretive about, or something you should be punished for. If you're feeling a lot of stress or anxiety about your sexuality or sexual health, it can help to talk to someone like a counsellor, friend, or health care provider. Try to find a health care provider you can trust to be knowledgeable and affirming of your identity and sexuality.

2S/LGBTQ+ folks: who you are and who you have sex with is valid.

* 2S stands for Two-Spirit, a term that connects Indigenous Peoples (of Turtle Island/North America) with diverse sexualities, gender identities, roles and/or expressions that were respected before colonization. LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, terms that express diverse gender and sexual identities that differ from the heterosexual and cisgender majority.

Recognizing signs of sexual health-related anxiety

The signs and symptoms of anxiety are different for everyone. Sexual health-related anxiety may look like some or all of the following:

Going to different doctors with the same concerns



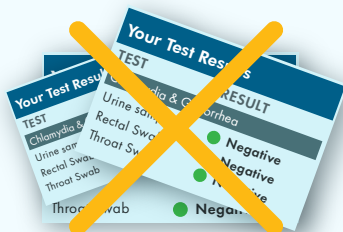
Paying close and constant attention to physical sensations for signs of illness



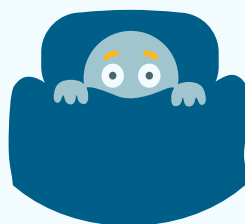
Spending lots of time researching sexual health information



Struggling to believe negative test results or other sexual health information



Avoiding visiting a healthcare provider because you're afraid of what you'll learn



Revisiting the sexual encounter that you were once comfortable with and re-writing it in your mind as something scary, risky or out-of-character

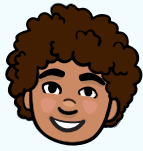


Reframing your thoughts

Our thoughts and actions can shape how we feel and even reinforce feelings of anxiety. Sometimes reframing your thoughts and actions can help reduce anxious feelings over time.



Less helpful



More helpful



Further information

I was tested for HIV and the tests came back negative, but I can't stop worrying about HIV. I want another test just to be sure.



HIV tests are almost 100% accurate. Even though I'm feeling worried, I know I don't need another test. There are other ways for me to deal with my anxiety.

Sometimes a negative test result only provides short term comfort when you are feeling anxious about your sexual health. It can be tempting to have multiple tests done, but in the long-run this can reinforce anxiety.

I had sex and we didn't use a condom. I know I should get tested, but I'm too scared.



Even though I'm nervous, I'm going to get tested. It's the only way to know for sure, and the doctor or nurse will be able to answer my questions. I'll try to remember that all STIs can be treated or managed.

Avoiding necessary medical care when feeling anxious can provide temporary relief, but delaying testing can just make the anxious feelings last longer. Plus, some STIs can have negative health effects if they're not treated. It's helpful to remember that STIs are treatable and/or manageable with medication.

I had sex with someone I didn't know. I've never done that before! I can't believe I was so reckless.



I tried something new with a new partner. I deserve to have positive sexual experiences.

Feeling more anxious after having new sexual experiences can happen. Blaming yourself for having sex that felt "risky" is also common. It's natural to feel anxious when trying new things, but just because something feels risky, it doesn't mean it actually is.

I can't believe I had sex with someone of the same gender. I'm not gay!



I'm allowed to explore different sides of myself. I don't need to label myself.

Sometimes social pressures and expectations about sex and sexuality can add to our anxiety, but everyone deserves to have pleasurable sexual experiences.

Other tips for managing sexual health-related anxiety

- Talk to a trusted support person; this could be a friend, relative, or anyone else who helps you feel safe discussing your feelings. If this is available to you, sometimes simply talking about anxiety can help with coping.
- Seek support from a counsellor or other professional.
- Pay attention to any coping strategies that might be reinforcing anxiety over time. For example, many people find that researching health information reduces their anxiety in the short-term, but actually *increases* their anxiety over time.
- Explore other anxiety management strategies, such as exercise, meditation, or journaling.
- Explore anxiety-specific resources, such as those available through Anxiety Canada.
- Everyone has a different comfort level with risk, including the risks that come with sexual experiences. If you'd like to learn more about safer sex strategies, consider talking to your healthcare provider.
- Remember that there are lots of different options for getting an STI test, including some clinics where you can remain anonymous and don't have to provide ID. If you're worried about showing ID, look for anonymous testing clinics in your region. If you're in BC, SmartSexResource's clinic finder is at <https://smartsexresource.com/get-tested/clinic-finder>.



Mental health resources



MindShiftCBT

<https://anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>

MindShift CBT is an app based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which offers tools, exercises, and strategies for managing anxiety.



MindMapBC

<http://www.mindmapbc.ca>

MindMapBC is an online database of over 100 low-barrier mental health services in BC, with the option of finding 2S/LGBTQ+ affirming providers.



Anxiety Canada

<https://anxietycanada.com>

Anxiety Canada offers resources, information, and educational tools to support individuals experiencing anxiety, including self-help guides.



BounceBack BC

<https://bouncebackbc.ca/>

BounceBack is a free, guided self-help program for individuals experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression.

Further learning

Previous research led by our team tells us that anxiety is common among people accessing sexual health services. We conducted a research study to better understand anxiety among people who are accessing sexual health services. We analyzed transcripts from SmartSexResource anonymous sexual health information chat service. We learned from this, and from sexual health providers, that people who access sexual health services sometimes experience persistent anxiety about their sexual health. For example, they often worry about having HIV or other STIs, even after getting a negative test result. Others suggest that, in these cases, people may benefit from mental health and other supports. This resource is intended to support people who are experiencing sexual health-related anxiety. If you'd like to learn more about this research and see the resource, visit <https://bit.ly/Sexual-Health-Anxiety>.