

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal reaction that helps us deal with difficult or dangerous situations. Other words for anxiety might be 'nerves', 'tension', 'fear', 'panic' or 'the shakes'.



If we are faced with a dangerous situation, we feel anxious and get ready to either fight, or run away. This type of anxiety is called your ANXIETY RESPONSE, and is good, and natural. For example:-

You are crossing a road and notice a fast car coming straight for you, it is your ANXIETY RESPONSE that helps you jump out of the way.

In this example it is easy to see what made you anxious and the anxiety soon disappears. Sometimes, however, we get anxious about things that are not dangerous, like meeting new people, or going to new places. This sort of anxiety stops people doing the things they would like to, and becomes a problem.

Anxiety can affect us in three ways:

1. Physical - affecting how our bodies feel
2. Thinking (Mental) - affecting how we think
3. Avoidance - affecting how we behave

Often we can feel stressed about all sorts of things for example, going to a new school, or a new place, problems in relationships with friends and family.

When we already feel stressed, it does not take much to trigger off the Anxiety Response. In these sorts of situations, anxiety does not really help, and it is sometimes difficult to see why we feel anxious. If we get feelings of anxiety when nothing really frightening has happened, we tend to worry that there might be something wrong with us.

How anxiety is triggered?

Although sometimes it feels like anxiety comes "out of the blue", there is always some reason why we get anxious or start panicking. These reasons are called **TRIGGERS**.



It is important to find out just what triggers the Anxiety Response for you. Once you know what this is, you can find better ways of preparing yourself for when you start to feel anxious, and then controlling your feelings.

There are three kinds of triggers in anxiety :

- **SITUATIONS AND PLACES** - for example, crowded places, the dentist's waiting room, going to school, arguing with your friends.
- **THOUGHTS-** for example 'I can't cope', "I'll make a fool of myself", "I will have a panic attack."
- **HOW YOUR BODY FEELS** - for example feeling your heart beating faster, feeling hot, butterflies in your stomach.

Where does anxiety come from?

"Why me?" Why do I become anxious and panicky when others don't?" There are a number of reasons why you may have become anxious in the first place. You can write down some answers here if you want to

YOUR CHARACTER. Some people from an early age they seem to be “nervy” or “highly strung”. This may be partly due to inheriting characteristics from parents, just like your height, sometimes hair and skin color



What were you like as a young child? Has anyone told you that you were “nervy” or a worrier and if so, how did they describe you?

A.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS. Also, many people learn to behave in an anxious way by watching reactions of their parents, or brothers or sisters. We all learn, particularly as children by imitating or copying the behaviour of those around us, for example, learning to speak or dance by copying others. *In the same way they can copy anxious reactions, for example, if a child sees someone else in the family jump up and scream when they see a spider, the child may react in the same way when he or she next sees a spider.* Is anyone else in your family anxious and in what way?



What anxious reactions do you think you may have learnt from other people when you were a child?

A.

STRESSFUL LIFE EXPERIENCES

There are two main ways in which this can happen.

1) *Conditioning*

This happens when someone becomes excessively anxious after severe stress. For example, after a car accident someone may become fearful of travelling in cars, or someone who has been struck in a crowded train or lift may become frightened of going in lifts or trains. Because they are fearful they then avoid the situation and never get the chance to learn that it is no longer as dangerous or frightening as before.



Can you think of any severe stresses such as these which may have caused your anxiety?

A.

2) Stressful life events



People can also become anxious if there are a number of stresses in their life over which they have little control. For example, someone who loses their job, experiences the death of a relative or close friend and moves house is under more stress than another person who does not experience such changes.

When under stress, people become more aroused and jumpy in situations that did not bother them in the past. They may learn to be frightened of their anxiety in that situation so that the anxiety continues even when their overall stress level is reduced.

Think back to the time when your anxiety started, or first became so bad as to cause you real distress. What else was happening in your life around that time?



Can you describe any stressful life events that may have started or made your anxiety symptoms worse?

A.

How anxiety affects us:- 1) Physical Anxiety



Here is a list of some of the ways our bodies feel when we feel anxious. Some people get all these symptoms, others get only a few. Some get symptoms not listed here.

Tick any of the symptoms you get and write down any others.

- Feeling short of breath
- Feeling tight across the chest
- Chest pains
- Dizziness
- Blurred vision
- Tingling in fingers, arms, legs or feet
- Palpitations / heart racing or pounding
- Muscle pains, especially neck pain and headache
- Shakiness
- Legs feeling weak (jelly legs)
- Butterflies or your stomach churning
- Sweating
- Feeling hot and cold
- Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing
- Feeling sick
- Urge to go to the toilet

How does anxiety cause physical symptoms?

Anxiety prepares the body for danger so that it can either fight or run away. To do this the body has to be ready to spring into action immediately. The Anxiety Response does this by:

- Making us overbreathe, and
- Putting a substance called Adrenaline into the blood stream.



This is fine when we are exercising, fighting or running, but if we get anxious while at rest, this can cause physical symptoms. This is how it happens:

1) Overbreathing

When anxious we feel we need to breathe harder, this changes the mixture of gases in our lungs and in our bloodstream. If we are not fighting or running, this can lead to physical symptoms, particularly dizziness, tingling sensations light headedness / "floating" feelings and feeling sick. These symptoms can lead to frightening thoughts, but are not dangerous.

2) Adrenaline

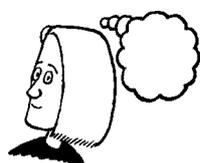
Anxiety makes the body produce adrenaline that has the following effects.

1. It **INCREASES THE STRENGTH AND SPEED OF THE HEART BEAT** to pump more blood around the body for exercise, fighting or running. This can cause the feeling of the heart pounding or racing, which can lead to anxious thoughts.
2. It **INCREASES TENSION IN THE MUSCLES**, preparing them to spring into action. This makes us feel tense all over. The muscles that get the most tense are the scalp, neck and shoulder muscles, causing headaches, neck ache or a feeling of a tight band around the head. Sometimes the muscles tremble or shake because of the tension, especially in the hands, arms, and legs.
3. Adrenaline sends blood to the muscles and **DRAINS BLOOD AWAY FROM THE STOMACH** area. This causes a churning feeling in the stomach and "butterflies". Sometimes adrenaline **SENDS BLOOD TO THE SKIN** to help cool the body down. Sometimes it **DRAINS BLOOD AWAY FROM THE SKIN** to send more to the muscles. this can make you feel hot or cold or even both. This is also what makes your face go pale or causes blushing.
4. Adrenaline **INCREASES SWEATING**.
5. **OTHER** changes in chemicals in the blood lead to uncomfortable symptoms including:- dry mouth, blurred vision, difficulty swallowing, and wanting to go to the toilet.



These symptoms often leave people feeling exhausted, but **NONE OF THESE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY ARE DANGEROUS.**

How anxiety affects us:- 2). Thoughts (Mental Anxiety)



The Anxiety Response also changes the way we think and the way we look at what is going on around us. It makes us watch out for possible dangers around us so that we can fight or run away on time. If we lived in a dangerous jungle it would help us survive, however it may become a

problem if we get anxious in everyday life situations. In these situations the Anxiety Response then **makes us THINK there is danger, even when there is none.**

When we get anxious, our minds can be full of all sorts of worrying thoughts and feelings. It makes it hard to concentrate and think straight. Sometimes the thoughts are about various problems, but they are often about the anxiety, particularly the physical anxiety itself. **THESE THOUGHTS CAN ACTUALLY MAKE THE ANXIETY WORSE.** (see the vicious circle of anxiety download)

The most common of these types of thoughts are listed below. Tick any that apply to you, and write down any others.

- "I can't cope"
- "I'll make a fool of myself" "I'll faint"
- "I'm going mad"
- "I'm going to lose control"
- "I'm having a heart attack",
- "I'm dying"
- "I can't breathe"
- "I've got a brain tumour"
- "I've got to get out"

Often anxiety symptoms make us feel frustrated or even guilty. Many people also get frightened that the symptoms will return. Unfortunately all these feelings cause anxiety and make the original anxiety worse. This makes us even more frightened.

How anxiety affects us:- 3). Avoidance

Avoiding situations that make us feel frightened is natural but will **definitely make your anxiety worse**. In real danger it is good to get away quickly, but when we feel anxious there is often no real danger. Avoiding things means that we stop ourselves from learning that the situations are really okay and not going to cause us any harm.



Avoiding a situation that makes us feel anxious makes us feel better at first, but then we will be even more worried about it the next time. The worry about the situation just gets worse and we avoid it more.

Here are the sorts of situations that some people avoid: Tick the ones that apply to you, and add your own.

- Crowds, Shops, School, College, Work
- Meeting people
- Public transport
- Leaving the house
- Heights

Some things are less obvious, like:

- Putting things off
- Not facing up to difficulties
- Getting the wrong type of help

The wrong kind of help:

Often friends and parents (or relatives) are very kind and supportive, but sometimes they can be too kind by taking over and relieving an anxious person of things they should be doing (like going out, meeting people or going to school/ college/ work. This is another form of *avoidance*. It can be useful to do this in a true crisis, but can lead to dependence and make it difficult to develop overcome anxiety, increase self confidence and a sense of achievement.



Are others doing too much for you? In what ways?

We get confidence by doing things. Avoidance means stopping doing things and can lead to losing confidence. This can mean more anxiety and feelings of failure. Avoidance can spread to more and more situations.

How to overcome anxiety



To overcome anxiety, the best thing to do is to ***stop avoiding situations, and change the way you think.*** (See the next download for details). This will lead to your body learning that there is nothing really to be frightened of, and the anxiety symptoms caused by over-breathing and adrenaline will gradually get less, but may not completely disappear.

