

# Anxiety

## What is anxiety?

Feeling anxious is very much a part of the experience of being human and is a normal human response. Anxiety is an important emotion for everyone. It helps us get around safely in the world, sending us a message that there is a potential threat so that we can act and avoid danger.

## How is Anxiety helpful?

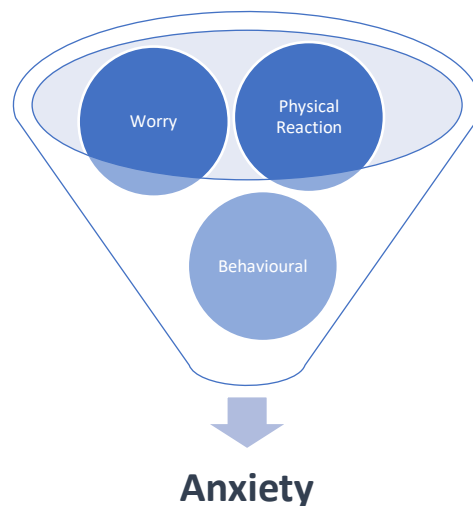
Anxiety from time to time can be helpful. For example, it can motivate you to prepare for a test at school or finish a task at work. Even happy events like starting a new job, moving into a new home or getting married can bring up anxiety—all of this is just part of being human and our anxiety is an emotional message for us to “watch out” when we find ourselves in new situations; preparing the self for survival in case of danger.

## Normal “Healthy” Anxiety

- Is related to a specific situation or problem
- Lasts only as long as the situation or problem
- Is proportional to the situation or problem
- Is a realistic response to a real problem or situation

## When Anxiety becomes a problem

Anxiety consists of three separate components... these are (1) worry, (2) physiological changes (‘fight, flight, or freeze’ response) and (3) behavioural changes to help cope with or avoid the feelings of anxiety.





**DON'T PANIC**

## **What is the fight/flight/freeze response?**

When a person is in danger several changes occur within the body affecting our physical, cognitive, and behavioural systems. This response has been named the fight/flight/freeze response and is our body's self-protection survival strategy which is activated instinctively when there is an actual threat or perceived threat.

<https://youtu.be/SJhcn7Q0-LU>

The experience of anxiety is similar to the experience of fear - the main difference is that anxiety occurs in the absence of real danger. It is important to fully understand the way our bodies react to threat or danger, whether real or imagined. Think of the brain as a smoke alarm. When a house is on fire the audible smoke alarm is activated and the alarm sounds that there is danger and that we need to take action to survive (flight response).

However, the response of the smoke alarm would be the same even if the threat of fire was not life-endangering. For example, if we were to burn some toast the smoke alarm cannot filter out the threat and would proceed to activate an audible alarm, the very same alarm as if the house were on fire. The threat/dangers are very different, yet the response of the event and the alarm is the same. When people experience high levels of anxiety for a prolonged length of time it can negatively affect the wellbeing of a person both mentally and physically as our "survival activation" is designed to be a short-term survival response.

## **When does anxiety become unhealthy?**

Anxiety is a problem when it becomes overwhelming or unmanageable. For some people, anxious feelings don't go away. People experiencing unhealthy anxiety can see situations as much worse than they are, and their anxiety affects their ability to concentrate, sleep and carry out ordinary tasks. People may avoid going about their daily lives to avoid anxiety.

Many people experiencing the symptoms of anxiety can begin to wonder if there is something wrong with them or fear that they might be going "mad". Many people say that they know their anxiety isn't based in reality, but they feel 'trapped' by their thoughts and feelings. And although you might feel alone in your struggle the reality is that many people experience these moods either from time to time or on a more regular basis.

Anxiety may come up unexpectedly, for seemingly no reason and may last for a long time, even when the situation or problem has been resolved. It may feel impossible to control or manage and may cause a person to avoid situations or things that they believe to trigger anxiety symptoms.

### **Symptoms of unhelpful anxiety**

Anxiety affects people in different ways and to different degrees, but common psychological symptoms include:

- Inability to relax, restlessness, and feeling keyed up or on edge
- Difficulty concentrating, or the feeling that your mind "goes blank" or the inability to "think straight".
- Excessive feelings of dread and worry about what might happen in the future.
- Relentless worry and endlessly thinking about events in the past.
- Obsessive thoughts which are difficult to stop.
- Feelings of panic and fear in situations where there is no actual danger.
- Persistent worrying or obsession about small or large concerns that are out of proportion to the impact of the event
- Worrying about excessively worrying
- Distress about making decisions for fear of making the wrong decision
- Carrying every option in a situation all the way out to its possible negative conclusion
- Difficulty handling uncertainty or indecisiveness
- Pressure on the self to stop feeling anxious.

### **Physical Symptoms**

Anxiety can cause physical symptoms as the brain activates the automatic survival response of fight/flight/freeze.

- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Muscle tension or muscle aches
- Trembling, feeling twitchy

- Being easily startled
- Trouble sleeping
- Sweating
- Nausea, diarrhoea, or irritable bowel syndrome
- Headaches

### **Different Types of Anxiety**

There are different categories of anxiety for example:

- Persistent, excessive, or unrealistic worries (Generalised Anxiety)
- Compulsions and obsessions (OCD)
- Intense excessive worry about social situations (Social Anxiety)
- Panic attacks
- An intense, irrational fear of everyday objects and situations (phobia).



### **Befriending Anxiety**

Anxiety is an emotion and is activated by the body's alarm and survival system. Just as physical pain can serve a useful function in alerting you to a physical problem that needs help, so anxiety can alert you to an issue or danger which needs attention. Instead of being critical of your anxiety and trying to get rid of it (which is impossible), it might be better to learn how to befriend it, acknowledge it, and learn techniques to reduce the level.

It can be helpful to personify your anxiety; for example, think of your anxiety as a cute meerkat (always on the watch or danger). When it appears, listen to its concerns, and take the appropriate action. If there is no threat, reassure your anxiety that all is ok and thank it for watching out for you. Help your anxiety by reducing its constant need to be "on guard" by recognising when it shows up and incorporating ways to reduce its occurrence.

## Reducing Anxiety

There are lots of things you can do for yourself to help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. Having an awareness of the symptoms and causes of anxiety can help us to tackle it better. Recognise the warning signs (both physical sensations and negative thought patterns).

## Reduce Stress

Stress is one of the components of anxiety. Too much stress activates our survival. A great way of managing anxiety is to incorporate lifestyle, and coping strategies to reduce stress.



## Breathe Deeply

When we feel stressed our heart rate increases resulting in faster breathing and increased blood pressure. When we breathe deeply the brain instructs the body to calm down and relax. Deep breathing is one of the easiest methods to reduce stress in the body and can be done immediately without any special tools. One of the most popular methods of deep breathing is called...

## Belly Breathing.

1. Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position and relax.
2. Place one hand on your belly just below the ribs and the other hand on your chest.
3. Take a deep breath through your nose, and let your stomach push your hand away. The chest should not move.
4. Breath out through pursed lips and feel the hand on your belly go in and use it to push out the air.
5. Repeat steps 3 – 10 times taking your time with each breath.
6. Repeat throughout the week to strengthen your diaphragm and to develop a more efficient way of breathing.

## **Yoga & Meditation**

We know that Yoga is beneficial in increasing flexibility and muscle strength, but Yoga is beneficial for both good physical and mental health. Some benefits include...

Boosting the Immune System

Decreased Blood Pressure

Helps prevent IBS and other digestive problems

Helps lower Depression.

Promotes deep relaxation

Promotes deep sleep.

## **Use Grounding Techniques to reconnect.**

When we are anxious, we are usually focusing on the future or ruminating on the past. Grounding helps to bring us back into the present. These strategies are useful for dealing with anxiety, creating a calmness in the present moment from where we can look at alternative ways of dealing with an overwhelming situation.

## **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is a practice that can help reduce anxiety and stress and research has shown that intruding mindfulness into your life can have positive effects on the whole-person health, including the mind, the brain, and the body.

## **Create a Coping Skills Go-to Box.**

Create a box full of items that can help provide calming and self-relaxation techniques at times of high-stress levels or anxiety. Some suggestions on what to put in your coping box ... Candles, essential oils, perfume, body lotion. Soft Toy / Soft Blanket. Puzzle Books. Reading Books. Paper, Pens and Crayons, Favourite DVDs, Stress Ball /Rubik Cube. Book of favourite poems Creative material -knitting etc. Sweets

## **Take Exercise**

Exercise releases chemicals like endorphins and serotonin that improve mood. It also pumps blood to the brain, which can help you to think more clearly and sleep more effectively. A daily walk in the fresh air is an ideal way to reduce

the feeling of anxiety, especially if you can find some green space and focus on the sounds and sights of nature. So, ditch the earplugs, disconnect the iPhone, and re-connect with the world and all its wonders. If you have any serious health complaints it is advisable to check with your GP before starting any new exercise regime.

### **Get enough rest**

Our lives are so much more fast-paced than they were even ten years ago. Technology rather than reducing our work time seems to have increased it. We take work home or have our phones constantly by the side of us ready to receive and respond to emails that interrupt our family time and rest time leaving many with feelings of exhaustion.

Rest, relaxation, and connection with friends and loved ones are essential to our well-being.

### **Seek Counselling**

Counselling provides an opportunity to explore your thoughts and feelings in a safe environment with someone who will listen without judgement. Within the safety of the relationship with a counsellor, there will be an opportunity to increase your self-awareness and understanding of how you exist in the world. This awareness provides the opportunity to explore and identify options for change to suit you and your situation.