

Anxiety

Anxiety is a felt – physical reaction often to a perceived threatening situation which activates the release of stress hormones (adrenalin and noradrenalin) providing an energy burst that fuels the age old automatic fight - flight response to increase the likelihood that you will survive a life-threatening situation.

Because the priority is on immediate survival, stress hormones act to increase your breathing and heart rate to pump blood and oxygen to muscles in your arms and legs, stimulate sweat glands essential to keep your body from overheating. Equally, those systems such as the digestive or reproduction systems which are not necessary for immediate survival are shut down (there is no point in digesting your last meal if, as in days gone by, you are on the menu).

Signs and symptoms

It is this automatic, “normal” response to perceived threat which accounts for many of the physical as well as the emotional and psychological symptoms of anxiety, which includes:

Physical symptoms

- Sweating profusely – clammy hands
- Gastrointestinal – upset (upset stomach, dry mouth, difficulty swallowing, loose motions, etc.)
- Central Nervous System [CNS] (ringing in the ears, blurred vision, dizziness)
- Difficulty breathing in, over-breathing, tight chest, light-headed
- Increased heart rate (palpitations, heart pain, missed or irregular beats).
- Panic (sudden episodes of extreme anxiety or dread)
- Genitourinary (passing more urine than usual, lack of sex drive and impotence)
- Muscular tension (tension headache, tremor, shakiness)

Psychological symptoms:

- Fear
- Irritability- restlessness
- Poor concentration
- Fatigue
- Sensitivity to noise – easily startled
- Disturbed sleep – difficulty getting or staying asleep (lying awake worrying, waking irregularly and unpleasant dreams, but not usually early morning waking)
- Poor memory (because of poor concentration).

The fight flight response:

The fight – flight response is a primeval and automatic physiological reaction unchanged from the days when we walked the plains with terrifying man-eating predators. A hard wired, adaptive and effective response which helped us survive. In modern life, the same response can help if we find ourselves threatened by an aggressive person, speed up our reactions to avoid a potential road traffic accident or give us the edge on the sports field or in the workplace.

- The stress response does not distinguish between actual “real” threat and perceived threat, different people will experience different levels of anxiety in response to the same, as well as a variety of different, life situations/events. For example, most of us will experience a normal level of anticipatory or performance anxiety in advance of an exam or job interview motivating us to prepare, lessening our anxiety and improving performance.

- Situations can be perceived, often outside of our awareness, as life/death, e.g., if I *don't* get that job promotion or get the right grade in my exam I *won't* survive. This will determine the intensity of the anxiety we experience. If the response generalises across time and situation we can find ourselves endlessly worrying by predicting and fearing the worst possible outcome.
- If the fight-flight response is activated and sustained we can become overwhelmed by fear, unable to focus or concentrate on the task at hand or simply avoid preparing, increasing anxiety levels which in turn increases our fear which can become debilitating.
- Finally, if the perceived threat is outside of our immediate awareness the physical response and associated anxiety can appear confusing or irrational. For example, losing your job may elicit an understandable fear and anxiety from feeling you will be unable to provide for yourself or your family. However, you may be less aware of the fear and anxiety evoked by the perceived threat of a loss of status and the anxiety may, therefore, become more generalised.

Potential risk factors

An anxiety provoking situation/event can also trigger negative memories from the past which heightens our anxiety in the present.

- For example, if as a child failing an exam or failing generally elicited an especially disapproving or humiliating response from a caregiver the perceived threat of failure and associated anxiety in adulthood will be heightened.
- We know that children with over-controlling parents who were unable to exert control over or influence their environment are more prone to develop an anxiety disorder in adulthood.
- Children exposed to early adverse or traumatic life experiences are also at greater risk of developing an adult anxiety disorder as are individuals with certain personality characteristics which combined with genetic make-up can increase the risk.

Other risk factors include being single, female and being exposed to current stressful actual or perceived life threatening events e.g., serious physical illness, financial problems, work based difficulties, unemployment and interpersonal or family conflict

For the reasons outlined above anxiety, therefore, can;

- Be experienced as either generalised – persisting across a variety of situations/time or as a “phobic” reaction to a specific event or situation, for example social phobia is a fear of public events from the fear of being criticised, judged negatively or embarrassed for making a perceived mistake.
- Be disproportionate to the “actual” stressful situation/event, or
- Persist when a stressful situation has gone, or the stress is relatively minor, or
- Appear for no apparent reason when there is no easily identifiable stressful or threatening situation

When should I seek help and support?

Whether the anxiety is acute as in panic – a phobic response to a particular situation/thing, or generalised, the physical and psychological symptoms are broadly similar.

As already noted at some point in time all of us will inevitably experience some level of anxiety in response to the ordinary ebbs and flows of life. Indeed, in the short-term anxiety can be useful, help direct our focus, improve performance and motivate us to successfully get the job, or get the job done.

In contrast, if anxiety levels persist and overwhelm your capacity to concentrate, this will have a negative impact on your performance and your life. It is important, therefore, that you learn to monitor the level and intensity of anxiety by noting and attending to the physical and psychological signs and symptoms.

Remember prevention is better than cure so here are some simple tips, life-style changes outlined below which you can put in place to help control and reduce anxiety or you may find it helpful to follow the self-help work-sheets on [panic attacks](#) and [worrying](#)

- Moderate or avoid caffeine and other stimulants as well as alcohol as they can intensify anxiety levels.
- Take regular exercise.
- Ensure you take time out to relax – wind down, establish a regular sleep pattern
- If you notice an increase in anxiety talk to someone you trust – it can help you regain perspective.
- Follow the 90:10 principle – accept the 10 percent of life events which, are outside your control, but recognise that 90 percent of the time you can control your reaction – this can turn the stress volume up or down.
- Try to identify and find words for what it is you are experiencing or are feeling threatened by – often the worst-case scenario is the least likely outcome.
- Avoid “if only” thinking. You can learn from the past but you can’t change it
- Avoid “what if” thinking – you can’t predict the future.

If your anxiety persists or intensifies consult your GP as soon as possible. This is important as anxiety can be part of or exist alongside other mental and physical health conditions and a thorough assessment will help to determine the right treatment which can include;

- Self-help (leaflets, books, tapes, videos, etc., or relaxation and combating stress)
- Anxiety management and psycho-educational courses
- Talking Therapies
 - Counselling
 - Cognitive therapy
- Medication
- Mindfulness based stress reduction or other relaxation techniques

Each of the above have been shown to be effective interventions for anxiety. However, there is no “quick fix” or one shoe fits all and it is important that you feel able to make an informed decision about which treatment or combination of treatments you feel most comfortable with.