

## Anxiety and panic – What works?



### Part 1

#### First of all - What is anxiety?

Anxiety, and it's more extreme sibling panic, are just your system going into survival mode because for some reason (you may not even remember why) you have been triggered into feeling under threat. This could be physical, emotional or mental threat. People who experience anxiety have been exposed to some form of stressful life event that has triggered their brain into doing some things in order to better survive and adapt to challenges. It releases stress chemicals and it attempts to learn how to combat threat in the future.

#### What happens in your body?



When your body is in survival mode it means an area of your brain – the hypothalamus - activates two systems: the [sympathetic nervous system](#) (SNS) and the adrenal-cortical system. The sympathetic nervous system uses *nerve pathways* to initiate reactions in the body, and the adrenal-cortical system uses the *bloodstream*. The combined effects of these two systems are the fight or flight response which you have probably heard of. It is preparing you to survive what it perceives as a physical threat by arousing your system so it can more effectively fight or flee the perceived danger.

This is a bit of a technical explanation so hang in there – and don't worry there is no test at the end. When the hypothalamus tells the SNS to kick into gear, *the overall effect is that the body speeds up, tenses up and becomes generally very alert*. If there's a tiger about to attack you, you're going to have to take action - and fast. The sympathetic nervous system sends out impulses to glands and smooth muscles and tells the adrenal medulla to release epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine (noradrenaline) into the bloodstream. These "stress hormones" cause several changes in the body, including an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.

At the same time, the hypothalamus releases corticotrophin-releasing factor (CRF) into the pituitary gland, activating the adrenal-cortical system. This activates the release of approximately 30 different hormones that get the body prepared to deal with a threat.

The sudden flood of epinephrine, norepinephrine and dozens of other hormones causes changes in the body that include:

- heart rate and blood pressure increase. Sometimes to the point where we can feel our pulse in various places we don't normally.
- pupils dilate to take in as much light as possible
- veins in skin constrict to send more blood to major muscle groups (responsible for the "chill" sometimes associated with fear -- less blood in the skin to keep it warm)
- paradoxically it can also mean an increase in body temperature (leading to sweating)
- blood-glucose level increases
- muscles tense up, energized by adrenaline and glucose (responsible for goose bumps - when tiny muscles attached to each hair on surface of skin tense up, the hairs are forced upright, pulling skin with them)
- This tensing, if prolonged or chronic, can then lead to other problems such as musculo-skeletal issues like stiff and sore neck and back, and headaches.
- smooth muscle relaxes in order to allow more oxygen into the lungs
- Breathing tends to speed up and be shallow. Sometimes we hold our breath (usually not consciously) for periods when anxious.
- We can start to feel dizzy or light headed.
- nonessential systems (like digestion and immune system) shut down to allow more energy for emergency functions. (Chronic anxiety can lead to more susceptibility to illness for this reason).
- You can start to feel nausea, bloating, or like you might throw up, or sometimes get diarrhea or constipation, or in more acute situations feel like you need to pee urgently
- trouble focusing on small tasks (brain is directed to focus only on big picture in order to determine where threat is coming from)

All of this can make you feel jumpy, agitated, alarmed, out of control, disconnected or slightly unreal. If anxiety becomes chronic and your system is on high alert a lot of the time this can have an effect on your overall health and tiredness is often an issue.

Highlight or note down some of the symptoms you are aware of when you feel anxious

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## What happens in your mind?



Once you have been exposed to a stressful life experience or feeling of threat and your body has gone into fight or flight (or if those avenues are cut off, then freeze) your mind then mobilises to increase the likelihood of survival. What this tends to mean is that your mind becomes more focussed on paying attention to potential harm in order to “solve the problem”. Humans are great problem solvers. Our mind will go over and over and over something in order to solve it. Sometimes to the point where we can’t seem to think about anything else! We think about it, and we pay attention to whatever we see as relevant to it.

We become hypervigilant. This vigilance can be on whatever we have identified as a potential threat. It might be symptoms or sensations within our own body, or it may be how other people seem to be responding to us, or situations where we feel there is a potential to be harmed, embarrassed, or out of control. Like flying in planes, getting cancer, being humiliated and so on. The list is endless. Our imagination is an excellent source of things to worry about!

And the more we pay attention to something, the more we notice it. Once anxiety takes hold the feeling of threat can be triggered by more and more things, as our brain pays more and more attention to potential sources of threat in order to combat them. This is how we learn anything. We pay attention, and we do it repeatedly. If you spent as much time learning a new skill as you spent thinking about what makes you anxious or worried you would be very good at it by now.



In other words, we learn to be good at being anxious. The more we pay attention to things that make us feel anxious, the more anxious we feel. In the case of *generalised anxiety* it can then become a default state that is there in the background all the time.

Note down what you are aware of that you tend to be overly vigilant of because of anxiety (and the events that may have triggered the anxiety)

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In addition to this our thinking can tend to become *negatively skewed*. In other words, we can take reality and distort our perception of it in a negative direction for reasons that seem to make sense but aren’t very helpful in the long run. Over the page is a list of common “cognitive distortions” we can tend to engage in when we are anxious (or highly stressed or depressed). Read through the list and highlight any that you are aware you can tend to do, especially if you are feeling anxious.

## Cognitive Distortions

### 1.ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:

You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a failure.

### 2.OVERGENERALIZATION:

You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. "This is just typical!"

### 3.MENTAL FILTER:

You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolours the entire container of water.

### 4.DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:

You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or another. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.

### 5.JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

*Mind Reading:* You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out. "She thinks I am an idiot; He is upset with me."

*The Fortune Teller Error:* You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. "I know it will be a disaster."

### 6.MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR MINIMIZATION:

You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement) or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other person's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."

### 7.EMOTIONAL REASONING:

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

### 8.SHOULD STATEMENTS:

You try to motivate yourself with should's and shouldn't's, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

### 9.LABELING AND MISLABELING:

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behaviour rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him or her: "He's a bastard." Or "She's a cow."

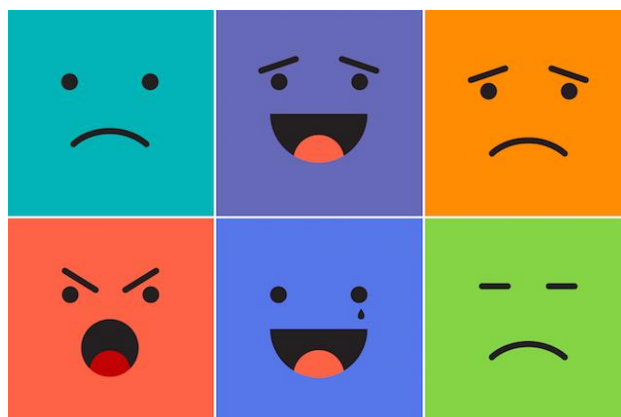
Mislabelling involves describing an event with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded.

### 10.PERSONALIZATION:

You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.

You can probably see how these distorted thoughts can impact how you are feeling.

## What happens to your emotions?



Generally speaking, worry, anxiety, and panic often result in a range of emotions and related feelings in your body, most of which we don't find very pleasant. We may feel:

- |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| fearful     | sad         |
| tense       | depressed   |
| pessimistic | trapped     |
| insecure    | wary        |
| inferior    | exposed     |
| defensive   | despairing  |
| embarrassed | helpless    |
| paranoid    | wounded     |
| vulnerable  | overwhelmed |
| incompetent | fidgety     |
| not worthy  | angry       |
| restless    | hopeless    |
| guilty      | despondent  |
| ashamed     | victimised  |

Think about situations that trigger worry, anxiety or panic. Notice what emotions you have felt. Circle any above that fit or add others that come to mind.

## What happens to your behaviour?



It is not hard to see how all the preceding things could affect our behaviour! Generally speaking, we engage in a variety of behaviours to attempt to escape our anxiety.

## What behaviours do we engage in to escape anxiety?



### Avoidance (Run away!)

It is common (and completely understandable) to try to avoid things that are unpleasant. This avoidance can come in many shapes and sizes. One obvious one is we try to **avoid situations or people** that might prompt us to feel anxiety. We might avoid conflict at all costs for example, by agreeing with everyone all the time. Or we might avoid certain people that trigger our anxiety, like anyone who shows anger, or anyone who ask questions we don't want to think about or answer. We might avoid tests or dentist appointments because they trigger anxiety. We might get to the point where it is easier to just stay home and avoid most of life. Another related form of avoidance is **procrastination** where we tell ourselves we will do it, but we are just putting it off for now.

Another way we avoid is by **distraction and suppression**. The "la la la" approach.

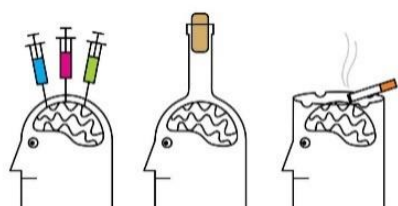
This means trying to get rid of the anxiety as quickly as possible. If I feel anxious I can distract myself by watching funny movies or TV. Or I will tell myself to stop it, or try to shut it out by repeating positive statements or trying to think of something else – the "sunshine and puppies" approach. "Not listening!"



### Reassurance seeking or getting others to do things for you

This is a subtler means of avoiding anxiety. At the first sign of it we immediately and *excessively* seek someone to reassure us we are okay. In fact, we may start to see it as their job or role particularly in the case of partners or parents. And we may even get angry or upset with them if they fail to do this to our satisfaction. Repetitive checking can be another way we try to reassure ourselves. Such as repetitively checking a body sensation or symptom, or checking you have locked the door, or

over-preparing for things, overly seeking others opinions to calm you down (friends, doctors, the internet etc). The other behaviour we can get into is getting others to do the things we are avoiding. Like send them to the shops, make them answer the phone etc.



### Numbing and withdrawing

Numbing is what we do when we don't want to feel things. Numbing is a common way of dealing with distress generally in our society. And anxiety is can be pretty distressing. We use alcohol, drugs (prescription, legal and illegal), binge or comfort eating, or various other addictions like shopping or

gambling, computer games, or sex.

Another common escape or withdrawal from distress is excessive sleeping as a way of zoning out and not having to deal with our anxiety. What is the difficulty with this? For one thing no drug or buzz lasts forever, so when it wears off we are back where we started. Sometimes with a hangover! Sometimes what we use to numb becomes a problem in itself and now we have an addiction issue as well. And the other thing is we can't *selectively* numb. If we numb some feelings, we numb all feelings. We become less able to feel anything. Life becomes one big flat beige horizon.



**Controlling.** In order to evade anxiety, we may also try various ways of controlling. This may be trying to control ourselves, like by rigidly trying to control our reactions. Or by trying to control our environment (including other people) so that anxiety triggers are avoided altogether. This may mean trying to manipulate situations so that we can avoid any triggers whatsoever. This can sometimes lead to extremes and even violence. This can be tiring, and tiresome

to others who don't appreciate our attempts to control things, and can threaten our relationships. We may also try to be more and more **perfect** (at least in certain spheres of our life) in order to feel safe. Perfectionism and anxiety and depression are highly correlated.

**I have CDO...  
it's like OCD but  
all the letters are  
in alphabetical  
order as they  
should be.**

We may become **Obsessive** about certain things and then **compulsive** in our behaviour with certain aspects of life in order to decrease our anxiety about the things we are obsessing over – unconsciously feeling that if those things are in control and “right” we will feel safe and secure. This might be having things a certain way, neatness or cleanliness, rigid routines, compulsive checking etc.

While all these behaviours work in the short term to decrease our anxiety (or we wouldn't use them), in the longer term they keep the anxiety going and usually make it worse and decrease our confidence, which leads to more anxiety, which leads to more escape attempts. And around we go.

All these behaviours become habitual, and the more we practice them the more reinforced they become. That is, we have *learned* the behaviour extremely well.

Exercise in awareness:

Note what listed behaviours you are aware that you engage in (at least some of the time) and add any others you can identify that are a result of anxiety. Be specific. And note the consequences short and long term. So the short term consequence may be a decrease in your anxiety, but what are some of the long term consequences you notice?

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It is important to celebrate being aware. Often we have a tendency to berate ourselves for things that we consider negative or ineffective. This doesn't help. Mostly it just makes us feel worse. So it is important to see being aware of our unhelpful patterns as something to celebrate. We have been honest enough with ourselves to admit it. That is a really good first step. You can't change something if you are not aware of it.

So, anxiety can be considered a normal response to perceived or actual threat, which has outlived its usefulness, but is being reinforced by *habit*. If you are genuinely in a physical threat situation this response is very helpful. If you are not, or the source of threat is long past or now insignificant, it is not only not helpful, but it becomes debilitating. So how do you combat this response? We have to change our habits.

We can manage anxiety habits on 3 levels – our Body, Mind and Behaviour. That is covered in the following parts.