

Anxiety

INFORMATION AND ADVICE

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is something we all experience from time to time. For example when we sit an exam, or go to hospital for an operation, it is natural to feel anxious. Sometimes anxiety is difficult to recognise, here are some other ways to

describe anxiety:

- Feeling stressed out
- Feeling tense or nervous
- Unable to relax
- Feeling on-edge or irritable



Anxiety is a natural and at times useful emotion to experience, it is our minds warning signal that something is dangerous and we need to take action. However anxiety in itself is not dangerous, although anxiety may feel horrible, it is not harmful. Nor does it last forever. When we are anxious, it may feel like the anxiety is never going to end, but all anxiety is temporary and will eventually decrease.

Key points:

- Anxiety is a normal and helpful emotion
- Anxiety becomes a problem when we feel it regularly.
- Anxiety is common.

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When we experience anxiety, our body's "fight-flight-freeze" response is triggered (some people feel this as a rush of adrenaline). This prepares our body to defend itself, for example it allows us to jump out of the way of a speeding car or motivates us to perform at our best.

We can think of anxiety as a fire alarm: It is needed to protect us from a real danger (when there is an actual fire), but sometimes the alarm goes off when there is no fire (e.g. burning toast) and this is when anxiety becomes problematic. Like a smoke alarm, anxiety is useful when it warns us of a threat, but, when it goes off when there is no real danger, it can be exhausting, scary, and have a real negative impact upon our lives. But we do not want to get rid of anxiety because it protects us from danger. We want to bring the anxiety down to a more manageable level so it is much more beneficial to us. Remember all the sensations you feel when you are anxious are there to protect you from danger, not to hurt you.

How common is anxiety?

Anxiety problems are common.

One-in-ten adults suffer from anxiety problems.

What are the symptoms of anxiety?

Symptoms of anxiety fall into two main categories: What we feel in our bodies, and what thoughts or worries go through our minds. Our bodies experience the symptoms listed below due to the adrenaline rush. Anxious thoughts are often worries focused on threat or uncertainty about the future.

Physical symptoms common with anxiety:

- **Rapid heart beat and rapid breathing** - When your body is preparing itself for action, it makes sure there is enough oxygen is being circulated to your major muscles and essential organs, allowing you to run away or fight off danger.
- **Nausea and stomach upset** - When faced with danger, the body shuts down digestion as it is not needed for survival; that way it can direct energy to functions that are critical for survival, this can lead to feeling sick or needing the loo more often.
- **Feeling dizzy or lightheaded** - Because our blood and oxygen goes to the major muscle groups when we are in danger it means that we will breathe much faster in order to move oxygen towards those muscles.
- **Tight or painful chest** - Your muscles tense as your body prepares for danger. Your chest may feel tight when you take in large breaths as those chest muscles are tense.
- **Numbness and tingling sensations** - Caused by hyperventilation (over-breathing)
- **Unreality or bright vision** - When responding to danger, our pupils dilate to let in more light and to make sure that we can see clearly enough. This reaction makes our environment look brighter or fuzzier, and sometimes less real.
- **Heavy legs** - As the legs prepare for action (fight or flight), increased muscle tension, as well as increased blood flow to those muscles, can cause the sensation of heavy legs.
- **Sweating or feeling hot.**

Thoughts and worries common with anxiety:

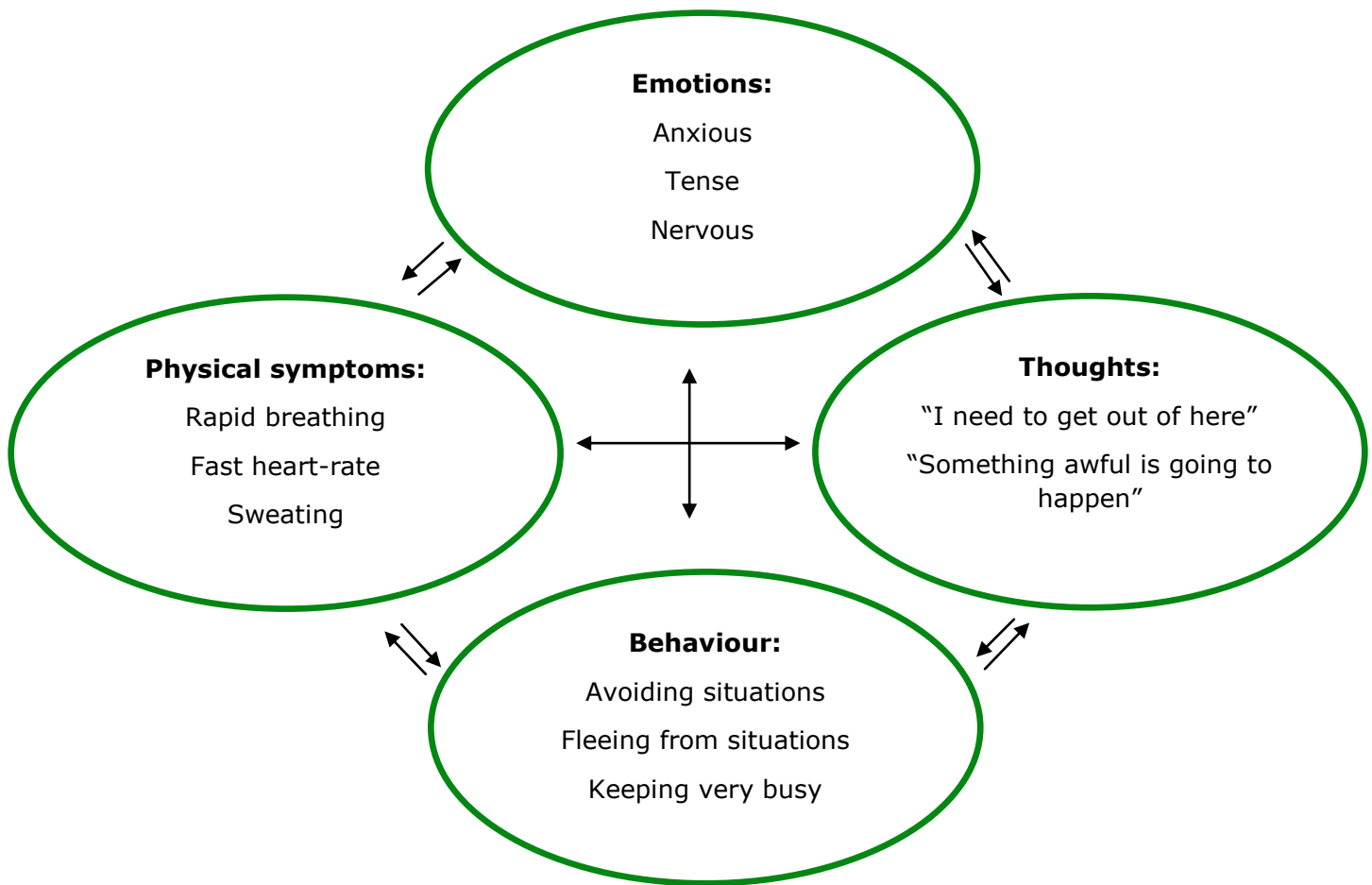
How we think:

- Worrying all the time about lots of different things.
- Worrying about worrying!
- Racing thoughts.
- Mind jumping from one thing to another without being able to concentrate on one thing.
- Imagining the worst case scenario
- Dwelling on the worst case scenario.

Common thoughts:

- "I'm losing control"
- "I'm going to faint"
- "I wont be able to cope"
- "What if..."(worst case scenario E.g. I lose my job)
- "I've got to get out of here"
- "What if I make a fool of myself?"
- "Something dangerous is going to happen"

What keeps anxiety going?



Above is what can be called a maintenance cycle, or vicious cycle of anxiety. Vicious cycles are very easy to get into: If we feel anxious and are thinking the worst, are experiencing unpleasant physical symptoms then it is understandable that we will avoid certain situations. Having on-going stressors in life or learning to worry from a young age can all contribute to anxiety. Fear of fear is another way that anxiety can perpetuate itself, we may worry about anxiety and this in turn creates anxious symptoms.

Avoidance can be a large part of what maintains anxiety, it functions as a coping mechanism to avoid anxious feelings. However, the things we tend to avoid when anxious are often not dangerous in themselves. For example it is very common for people to avoid things like public transport, crowded places, talking to people, or going far away from their house. When we avoid these things it often ends up making life difficult and inconvenient, when we avoid things we also miss out on meaningful activity that can lead to other problems such as depression. Avoidance often creates a lack of confidence in us, when we do not do things, not only do we teach ourselves that these things are not safe we also teach ourselves that we cannot cope with them. This may lead to more worries about dealing with situations and events which may create feelings of insecurity or low self worth and in turn feed back into the vicious cycle of anxiety and make it worse.

What Treatments are available?

At TalkPLUS we mainly offer Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This is an evidence-based treatment, which means it has been proven to help people who suffer with anxiety and worry. CBT aims to help people better manage or overcome their anxiety by learning skills and ways to cope.

There are several steps involved in treating anxiety. The first one involves understanding more about it and how it relates to you: what is anxiety, what symptoms are you experiencing and how these are connected. What keeps it going and what triggers are involved. This understanding is an important step to take to start tackling anxiety as it is much easier to change when we know why we are doing it and how the change can help us.

Once you have learnt more about your unique experience of anxiety you can start to tackle it by learning ways to manage it better. This is done using two different treatment approaches. Some people need to use both techniques, for other people one is enough. The two different techniques are:



Worry Management

Worry management involves two things: Problem solving and worry time. Problem solving aims to find ways to tackle and solve problems in a proactive way. When our problems are solved we spend less time worrying about them. Worry time is a technique used to contain worry, it involves setting aside a set time everyday in order to worry, this reduces the impact of worry on our lives.

Graded exposure

Many people find feeling anxious is maintained by avoiding situations that evoke fear. Although escaping from a situation temporarily relieves anxiety, continual avoidance makes it even more frightening to experience the same situation again and makes anxiety worse.

Exposure therapy is a highly effective treatment that reduces anxiety through habituation. Habituation is a natural decrease in anxiety that occurs when people do not avoid and remain in a feared situation.

The above treatments can be explained in much more detail with your therapist.

Useful contacts

- Anxiety UK: www.anxietyuk.org.uk
- Anxiety Care: www.anxietycare.org.uk
- Anxiety BC: www.anxietybc.com
- Mind Info Line: www.mind.co.uk
- Rethink: 0300 500 0927
- <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/anxiety,panic,phobias.aspx>