

Anxiety

Adapted from www.getselfhelp.co.uk

Anxiety is an emotion that triggers the body's response to being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight. It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism. This response can be started either by external events like something we see, or internal events like a thought or a memory.

Anxiety can be very useful. Primitive humans wouldn't have survived without it. Today there are also many situations in which it helps us to pay attention and make the best decisions, or to respond physically to threats. But it can also be a big problem.

- If anxiety is too strong, it becomes overwhelming, makes us feel bad and stops us making good decisions.
- Much of what we get anxious about these days, like financial stress or a loved one's death, isn't helped by the physical response to anxiety.
- When we stay anxious for a long time the body's physical response, such as adrenaline, stops helping and instead makes us feel tired, drained, and unhappy. It may promote illness.
- Our anxiety response often can't tell the difference between concerns that are real and our thoughts. It will kick in whether it will be helpful or not.
- People who are anxious tend to scan for danger and become hyper-alert to any possible concerns, which increases the risk of staying anxious when it isn't helpful.

How anxiety affects us

Thoughts

Anxious thoughts often relate to our overestimating or exaggerating the actual threat and underestimating or minimising our ability to cope.

- I'm in danger right now.
- The worse possible scenario is going to happen.
- I won't be able to cope with it.

Physical sensations

We may notice lots of physical sensations, which might include the following.

- Heart racing or seeming to beat unevenly. This can be so strong that people think they are having a heart attack.
- Breathing gets faster. This can lead to chest pain, breathlessness, a choking feeling, dizziness or light headedness, and blurred vision. It feels bad, but does not cause long-term harm.
- Changes in skin, fingers and toes. This can be tingling, coldness, numbness and looking pale or flushed. It can also involve sweating.
- Muscle tension. The large skeletal muscles tense and create power, this may cause aching and shaking. It can also cause pain, including headaches. When sustained, it is tiring.
- Dilated pupils. This may cause sensitivity to light or spots before the eyes.

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- Digestive changes. Our digestive system slows down, which may lead to nausea, 'butterflies in the stomach' and a dry mouth.

Behaviours

Anxiety affects what we do. Often we change our behaviour to avoid triggering the anxiety, for example:

- Not going out.
- Avoiding people or places.
- 'Escaping' or leaving situations early.
- Going to certain places at certain times.

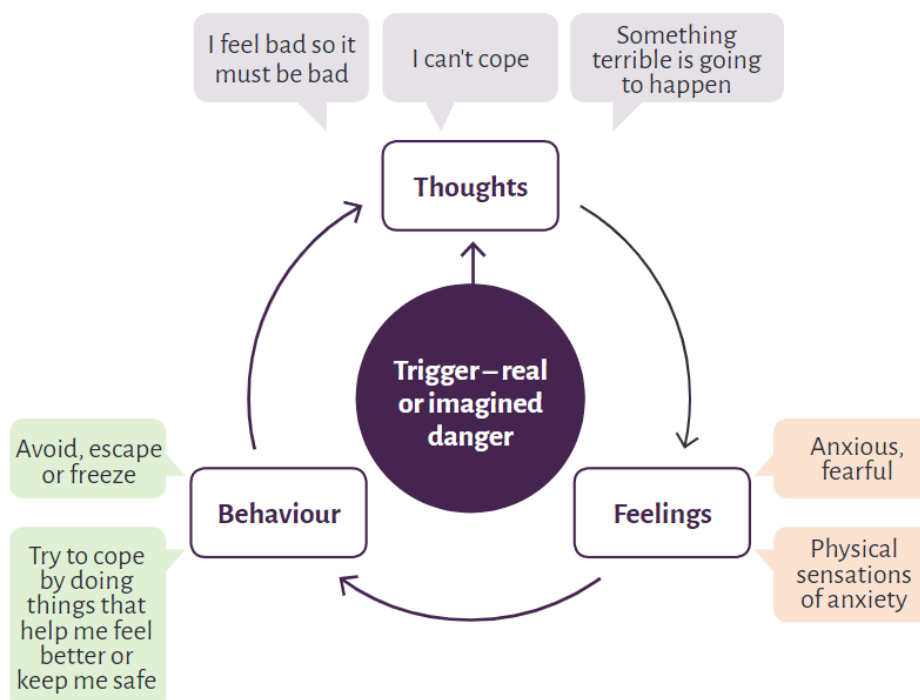
Other behaviours aim to help us cope with the anxiety.

- Only going with someone else.
- Going to the feared situation but using coping behaviours to get you through, like self-talk, holding a drink, smoking more, fiddling with clothes or a handbag, avoiding eye contact, having an escape plan, or medication.

Some of these behaviours actually help us cope better with the anxiety, but others help us feel less anxious in the short-term while actually making the anxiety worse in the long-term. These are called safety behaviours.

Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is often caused or made worse by a vicious cycle in which anxiety-provoking thoughts cause changes in our emotions (feelings) and/or behaviours, and then these changes intensify our anxious thoughts, making the anxiety more severe. The following diagram shows this vicious cycle.



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Doing things differently to reduce anxiety

Feeling some anxiety at times is natural and helpful. It helps us to focus, avoid harm and achieve. Trying to avoid any anxiety often ends up causing much worse anxiety, so being prepared to feel anxious sometimes is healthy. Our aim is to help stop the anxiety becoming so overwhelming or so constant that it stops being helpful and starts being a problem. To do this we often need to do things differently to either:

- reduce or remove the cause of the anxiety if we can, or
- use strategies to reverse the vicious cycle so it becomes a victorious cycle—one that helps you reduce the level of anxiety you feel.

Doing things differently to reduce anxiety takes time and effort, but is possible!

Doing self-care differently

Looking after yourself well is an important way of decreasing anxiety.

- Regularly eating nutritious food and drinking plenty of water is very important.
- Exercise is an important anxiety and stress buster. Make sure you are getting some exercise (at least a good walk) several times a week.
- Get as much good sleep as you can. Go to bed at a time that gives you the chance to get enough sleep.
- Take time to do things you find fun and relaxing.

Identify the triggers for your anxiety

What or when are the times and situations when you are more likely to get anxious? If you can see the patterns, then often you can do something about them. Is it certain places, people, situations, thoughts or memories? Or other things?

Recognising your triggers is a great first step in doing things differently about your anxiety. Different types of triggers need different ways of dealing with them. Some ways you can do this are shown below.

Reduce the cause of anxiety

Some causes of anxiety can be reduced. Some can't be reduced, or doing so will negatively affect life more than any benefit of reduced anxiety. When there are external triggers to your anxiety, a top priority is to do what you can to reduce the causes of anxiety as much as is practical and helpful. Using coping strategies such as those below is helpful, but always think carefully about if or how you can reduce the stress as well.

Think (and maybe talk with others) about what you can do to reduce the causes of unhelpful anxiety. Be creative. Things that help remove the causes of anxiety can be very useful even if they don't remove it entirely. Make a list of your ideas. Choose the best and most practical idea(s) and get started on making it happen.

However, if you are doing this, ensure you are actually reducing the cause of the anxiety, not just using safety behaviours that offer short-term but more anxiety long-term.

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Stopping avoidance

Avoiding situations often keeps anxiety going over the long-term. Learning to confront (or stay in) these situations might be uncomfortable in the short-term, but helps us to feel in control over time as we learn we can cope with and even enjoy these situations.

Make a plan to gradually do the thing you normally avoid. People often repeatedly do situations that are mildly anxiety-provoking and, when they feel comfortable in this situation, work up to more anxiety-provoking situations.

- If you normally avoid social events, start with small dinners with people you feel more comfortable with, then dinners with people you know less well, and slowly work up to the annual Christmas party!
- If you have a fear of a particular situation, such as going in a lift, make a list of different situations related to it from the least to most anxiety-provoking. For example: standing near a lift, standing in a lift with the doors open, going one floor in a glass lift, then going one floor in an enclosed lift. Start by doing the least anxiety-provoking situation for a few minutes each day, then slowly move up to the next level when you feel comfortable, and so on.

Using breathing techniques, self-talk (challenging unhelpful thoughts and choosing more realistic thoughts), and other coping strategies listed below will help you be more comfortable doing this.

If you normally depend on safety behaviours to help you cope, then list them in order of importance, then start by dropping or not doing the least important, and gradually work your way up over time.

Thinking differently to reduce anxiety

Thinking strategies are also important for helping to reduce anxiety. Use STOPP! Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Pull back, Practise what works.



Reflecting on your own thinking

- What am I reacting to?
- What is it that I think is going to happen here?

Catching problem thinking patterns

- What's the worst (and best) that could happen? What's most likely to happen?
- Am I getting things out of proportion?
- How important is this really? How important will it be in 6 months' time?
- Am I overestimating the danger?
- Am I underestimating my ability to cope?
- Am I mind-reading what others might be thinking?
- Am I putting more pressure on myself?
- Am I believing I can predict the future?

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Thinking of helpful alternatives

- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What advice would I give someone else in this situation?
- Just because I feel bad, doesn't mean things are really bad.
- What do I want or need from this person or situation? What do they want or need from me? Is there a compromise?
- What would be the consequences of responding the way I usually do?
- Is there another way of dealing with this? What would be the most helpful and effective action to take? (for me, for the situation, for others).
- Visualise yourself coping in the situation you feel anxious about. See the situation to a successful completion.

How to deal with the physical sensations of anxiety

- Be aware that the physical sensations of anxiety are not pleasant, but they won't really hurt you!
- If you focus your attention elsewhere, the physical sensations will settle over time.
- Practice calming or mindful breathing – this will help reduce the physical sensations, emotions and intensity of thoughts. See www.getselfhelp.co.uk/mindfulness.htm

Keeping going

All of these ways of doing things differently are ways of reducing anxiety, but it does take time. It is important to keep on doing these things even if they don't seem to work straight away is very important!

Further information and help

- Anxiety NZ offers information, resources and a free 24/7 helpline <https://www.anxiety.org.nz/>
- The Lowdown offers information on anxiety, self-help resources and a free 24/7 helpline for anxiety and other mental health concerns <https://thelowdown.co.nz/categories/anxiety/anxiety/>
- For information on anxiety and differentiating it from depression, visit depression.org.nz
- The Ministry of Health offers a directory of information and tools for general mental wellbeing <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-health-advice-public/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-resources>
- For information on anxiety, treatment and support groups in New Zealand, visit <https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/health-a-z/a/anxiety>