

What Is Anxiety?

Most people do not recognize their anxiety for what it is and instead think something is “wrong” with them. Some people are preoccupied with the symptoms of anxiety (e.g. stomach aches, increased heart rate, shortness of breath, etc.). Others think they are weird, weak or even going crazy. Unfortunately, these thoughts only make people feel even more anxious and self-conscious.

Therefore, the first step to successfully managing anxiety is to learn to understand and recognize it. Self-awareness is essential.

The Facts

Myth: Reading, thinking and learning about anxiety will make you even MORE anxious.

Fact: If you do not know what you are dealing with, how do you manage it? Having accurate information about anxiety can reduce confusion, fear and shame. Anxiety is a common and normal experience, and it CAN be managed successfully.

Learning the Facts About Anxiety

1. Anxiety is normal. Everyone experiences anxiety at times. For example, it is normal to feel anxious on a rollercoaster or before a job interview.

2. Anxiety is adaptive. It is a system in our body that helps us to deal with real danger (for example, anxiety allows us to jump out of the way of a speeding car) or to perform at our best (for example, it motivates us to prepare for a big presentation). When you experience anxiety, your body’s “fight-flight-freeze” response (also called the “adrenaline response”) is triggered. This prepares your body to defend itself.

More on Fight-Flight-Freeze

Our body’s natural alarm system (the fight-flight-freeze response) can be activated when there is a real danger, such as coming across a bear when hiking in the woods. In this case, you may flee (e.g. run away from the bear), freeze (e.g. stay still until the bear passes), or fight (e.g. yell and wave your arms to appear big and scary).

This response can also occur when something feels dangerous but really isn’t, such as being interviewed for a job. For example, you may feel jittery, on edge or uncomfortable. You may snap at people (fight) or have a hard time thinking clearly (freeze). These feelings can become overwhelming and make you feel you want to avoid doing the interview (flight). Many people stop doing things or going places that make them feel anxious.

Can you think some ways you may fight, flight or freeze because of your anxiety?

3. Anxiety is not dangerous. Although anxiety may feel uncomfortable, it is not dangerous or harmful to you. Remember, all the sensations you feel when you are anxious are there to protect you from danger, not hurt you.

4. Anxiety does not last forever. When you are anxious, you may feel like the anxiety is going to last forever. But anxiety is temporary and will eventually decrease.

5. Anxiety is mostly anonymous. Most people (except those close to you) cannot tell when you are anxious because it does not show on your face.

6. Anxiety can become a problem. Anxiety is a problem when your body reacts as if there is danger when there is no real danger. It’s like having an overly sensitive smoke alarm system in your body.

7. Anxiety problems are common. 1-in-10 adults suffer from anxiety problems.

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Anxiety is like a smoke alarm system:

A smoke alarm can help protect us when there is a fire but, when a smoke alarm is too sensitive and goes off when there isn't a fire (e.g. burning toast in toaster), it is annoying.

Like a smoke alarm, anxiety is helpful and adaptive when it works properly but, if it goes off when there is no real danger, it can be scary and exhausting.

However, we DO NOT want to get rid of the alarm (or eliminate anxiety) because it protects us from danger. We want to fix it (i.e. bring the anxiety down to a more manageable level) so it works properly for us.

What Happens to Your Body When You Are Anxious?

Anxiety can cause many sensations in your body as it prepares for danger. These sensations are called the "alarm reaction". They occur when the body's natural alarm system ("fight-flight-freeze") is activated.

Rapid heart beat and rapid breathing: When your body is preparing itself for action, it makes sure enough blood and oxygen are circulated to your major muscle groups and essential organs. This enables you to run away or fight off danger.

Sweating: Sweating cools the body. It also makes the skin more slippery and difficult for an attacking animal or person to grab hold of you.

Nausea and stomach upset: When faced with danger, the body shuts down systems/processes that are not needed for survival; that way it can direct energy to functions that are critical for survival. Digestion is one of the processes that is not needed at times of danger. Because of this, anxiety might lead to feelings of stomach upset, nausea or diarrhea.

Feeling dizzy or lightheaded: Because our blood and oxygen goes to major muscle groups when we are in danger, we breathe much faster to move oxygen toward those muscles. However, this can cause hyperventilation (too much oxygen from breathing very rapidly to prepare the body for action), which can make you feel dizzy or lightheaded. Also, since most of your blood and oxygen are going to your arms and legs (for "fight or flight"), there is a slight decrease of blood to the brain, which can also make you dizzy. Don't worry-- the slight decrease in blood flow to the brain is not dangerous.

Tight or painful chest: Because your muscles tense up as your body prepares for danger, your chest may feel tight or painful when you take in large breaths.

Numbness and tingling sensations: Hyperventilation (taking in too much oxygen) can also cause numbness and tingling sensations. The tingling sensations may also related to the fact that the hairs on our bodies often stand up when faced with danger to increase our sensitivity to touch or movement. Finally, fingers and toes may also feel numb/tingly as blood flows away from places where it is not needed (like our fingers) and towards major muscle groups that are needed (like our arms).

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 our 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.

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More About How Anxiety Works

Often, how we interpret a situation determines how anxious we will feel about it and how we respond. Therefore, there are 3 parts to anxiety, specifically: physical symptoms (how our body responds); thoughts (what we say to ourselves); and behaviours (what we do or our actions). Learning to recognize these signs of anxiety can help us be less afraid.

Thoughts e.g. What if I forget what I want to say during the presentation?

Behaviours e.g. find an excuse to get out of it

Physical Symptoms e.g. stomach ache, cold sweat, racing heart

Recognizing physical symptoms of anxiety

You can learn to identify the physical signs of anxiety by asking yourself: "What happens when I'm anxious? Where do I feel the anxiety in my body?" For example, when you feel anxious, you may get butterflies in your stomach, sweat a lot, breathe heavily, and feel dizzy or lightheaded.

REMEMBER: If you often experience many uncomfortable physical symptoms, but doctors cannot find anything wrong with you physically, you may have problems with anxiety. You are definitely not "going crazy". Although these symptoms may be uncomfortable, they are not harmful.

Recognizing anxious thoughts

Anxiety also affects how we think. Anxious thoughts typically involve a fear of something bad happening.

Recognizing anxious behaviours

Anxiety can make us feel very uncomfortable and make us believe we are in danger. No wonder you may feel a strong urge to escape or avoid situations/activities/people that make you anxious. For example, if you are scared of dogs, you would probably avoid going to places where you may encounter a dog (e.g. dog park).

To help you identify situations that you avoid, try to come up with as many answers as possible to the following:

If you wake up tomorrow morning and all your anxiety had magically disappeared, what would you do?

How would you act?

How would someone close to you know you weren't anxious?

Finish the following sentences:

My anxiety stops me from...

When I am not anxious, I will be able to....

Once you are able to understand and recognize anxiety, you will be better prepared to move on to the next stage - learning general self-help strategies.

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