

Anxiety

Anxiety is the word used to describe feelings of unease, worry and fear. It incorporates both the emotions and the physical sensations we might experience when we are worried or nervous about something. Although we usually find it unpleasant, anxiety is related to the 'fight or flight' response – our normal biological reaction to feeling threatened.

We all know what it's like to feel anxious from time to time. It's common to feel tense, nervous and perhaps fearful at the thought of a stressful event or decision you're facing – especially if it could have a big impact on your life. For example:

a build-up of stress in work

attending an interview

starting a new job

moving away from home

being diagnosed with an illness

deciding to get married or divorced

In situations like these it's understandable to have worries about how you will perform, or what the outcome will be. For a short time you might even find it hard to sleep, eat or concentrate. Then usually, after a short while or when the situation has passed, the feelings of worry stop.

WHAT IS A 'FIGHT' OR 'FLIGHT' RESPONSE?

Like all other animals, human beings have evolved ways to help us protect ourselves from dangerous, life-threatening situations. When you feel under threat your body releases hormones, such as adrenalin and cortisol, which help physically prepare you to either fight the danger or run away from it. These hormones can:

Make you feel more alert, so you can act faster

Make your heart beat faster to carry blood quickly to where it's needed most

Then when you feel the danger has passed, your body releases other hormones to help your muscles relax, which may cause you to shake.

This is commonly called the 'fight or flight' response – it's something that happens automatically in our bodies, and we have no control over it. In modern society we don't usually face situations where we need to physically fight or flee from danger, but our biological response to feeling threatened is still the same.

HOW CAN IT AFFECT MY MENTAL HEALTH?

Because anxiety is a normal human experience, it's sometimes hard to know when it's becoming a problem for you – but if your feelings of anxiety are very strong, or last for a long time, it can be overwhelming. For example:

- ▶ You might find that you're worrying all the time, perhaps about things that are a regular part of everyday life, or about things that aren't likely to happen.
- ▶ You might regularly experience unpleasant physical and psychological effects of anxiety, and maybe panic attacks.

ANXIETY DISORDERS

If you are worried about your anxious feelings or if they are persistent it's important to see your GP. There are a number of anxiety disorders:

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

If you have felt anxious for a long time and often feel fearful, but are not anxious about anything specific that is happening in your life, you might be diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder (GAD).

Panic disorder

If you experience panic attacks that seem completely unpredictable and you can't identify what triggers them, you might be given a diagnosis of panic disorder. Experiencing panic disorder can mean that you feel constantly afraid of having another panic attack, to the point that this fear itself can trigger your panic attacks.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

OCD is a diagnosis you might be given if your anxiety leads you to experience:

- ▶ **Obsessions** unwelcome thoughts, images, urges or doubts that repeatedly appear in your mind.
- ▶ **Compulsions** repetitive activities that you feel you have to do.

Phobias

A phobia is an intense fear of something, even when that thing is very unlikely to be dangerous to you. If you have a phobia, your anxiety may be triggered by very specific situations or objects.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

If you develop strong feelings of anxiety after experiencing or witnessing something you found very traumatic, you might be given a diagnosis of PTSD. PTSD can cause flashbacks or nightmares which can feel like you're re-living all the fear and anxiety you experienced during the actual event.

HOW CAN I COPE?

If you experience anxiety or panic attacks there are many things you can try to cope:

- ▶ talking to someone you trust
- ▶ breathing exercises
- ▶ shifting your focus
- ▶ listening to music
- ▶ reassuring thoughts
- ▶ physical exercise
- ▶ keeping a diary
- ▶ eating a healthy diet
- ▶ complementary therapies
- ▶ joining a support group

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