

Anxiety

Student Counselling Service

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Notes...

Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety and worry are fundamental human emotions that we all feel at times. Anxiety is a feeling we experience when we feel fear. It can have a very healthy purpose, signalling our need to be cautious/realistic/responsible in our relationship to our environment and to other people. Thus it may act as a trigger to remind us of our need to blow out a candle before we leave the house, or alert us to where we may be overstepping the mark with another person.

We also experience anxiety when we are faced with the challenges of what is new or unknown to us. It can signal a period of creative change and growth in our lives, but it can also cause us discomfort, ranging from mild uneasiness to severe panic.

Some general situations which might trigger anxiety include:

- leaving home
- coping with work and exams
- dealing with relationships
- moving to a new area
- preparing to leave university
- sexuality issues

More specific triggers for anxiety might include:

- having to meet new people
- having to deal with people in authority
- making choices about courses or careers
- having to speak in public or make a presentation
- fears about health

How we react to Anxiety

Notes...

The body

When fear is experienced, an automatic chain of events occurs in a person's body, which prepares them for action. The degree to which the body responds depends on the level of fear that is being experienced.

- The 'primitive' part of the brain prepares the body for 'flight or fight' (more about this below); the adrenal glands produce the hormones and adrenalin that get released into the blood stream. This can cause such symptoms as trembling, heart racing, dry mouth, sweating, stomach churning, disturbances of bowel and bladder function, aches and pains, headaches. Sometimes repeated feelings of anxiety can lead to a lowering of the effectiveness of the immune system and we become prone to colds or flu or other viruses.
- In some situations a person may feel unable to fight or flee, in which case they freeze. Freezing also relates to panic.

Our emotions

We may accompany physical symptoms with emotional responses to anxiety such as: feelings of guilt, increased worrying, feeling tense/angry/withdrawn, feeling lonely or helpless. Of course we may feel nervous, fearful or sometimes paranoid. We may begin to feel unworthy or not good enough.

Our behaviour

When we are anxious we might:

- find it difficult to concentrate
- over-eat or drink too much
- have disturbed sleep patterns
- avoid people or increase our dependency on others too much
- put off or stop working
- become accident prone
- speed up everything we do

Books

How to Stop Worrying - Frank Tallis *

Relaxation - James Hewitt *

Meditation - Bill Anderton *

Coping with Anxiety and Depression - Shirley Trickett *

Understanding Panic Attacks and Overcoming Fear
- Roger Baker

Panic Attacks - Sue Breton

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway - Susan Jeffers *

Anxiety and Panic Attacks - Robert Handly

Managing Anxiety - Helen Kennerley

Overcoming Anxiety - Helen Kennerley

Living with Fear - I.M. Marks *

Anxiety and Depression - A Practical Guide to Recovery
- Robert Priest *

Overcoming Panic - Derrick Silove and Vijaya Manicavasagar

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder - The Facts - Padmal de Silva
and Stanley Rachman

Understanding Obsessions and Compulsions - Frank Tallis

Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness - Gillian Butler *

* Books in the counselling service library (there are also some
audio tapes available)

Our thoughts and beliefs

Our thoughts and beliefs may trigger anxiety in us. For example, we may hold a belief that we need to perform perfectly at all times, or perhaps exclusively in our academic work, which may make the run-up to exams an enormously anxious time for us. Anxiety itself can also lead to an escalation in our negative or unhelpful thoughts. This seems to happen especially when we are not sleeping well because of anxiety. The kind of thoughts which begin to dominate might include:

- “I’m going to fail”
- “I’ll make a fool of myself”
- “I will lose control”
- “I’m not good enough”
- “I have to be perfect”

We might start to analyse every detail of our conversations and blame ourselves for what we have said. We might start to make sweeping generalisations based on some small comment someone else has made. We might start to go in for ‘all or nothing’ and ‘black and white’ thinking or tend to see the negative in everything. We may minimize our successes and maximise our failures. We may start to produce sharp flashes of imagination in our mind (usually pictures of us in a particularly feared situation) which can be very vivid and disturbing. We may have quite obsessive thoughts about an area of concern and these thoughts may race uncontrollably. All of these ways of thinking become possible and likely when we are anxious.

How we react to Anxiety *(Continued)*

Fight or flight

- However difficult it might be for us to live with certain levels of anxiety, it is important for us to know that experts believe that anxiety has a primitive and crucial function, dating back to a time when humans needed to stay alert in order to fight or flee in the face of potential predators. We needed to be anxious in the most obvious way possible when faced with extreme dangers so that we would be triggered to defend ourselves or run away. This 'fight or flight' mechanism is no longer so critical to our survival, and so anxiety often becomes excessive as it builds up in a person's physical/emotional/mental energy system without being understood, responded to appropriately, and therefore released.
- A key factor in states of anxiety and stress is that a person's reactive or 'primitive' brain takes over, and they lose the ability to think creatively, and with spatial awareness or perspective. This primitive reaction is only useful if we are really in a situation where we need to fight or flee a situation that is a matter of life or death. When we are, we start to think in 'black and white', 'all or nothing' terms (which of course is the only useful way to think if we are faced with an immediate physical threat which requires an immediate and decisive reaction). In our more complex world these blanket reactions may be inappropriate and unhelpful. Rather than living our experience in the present with flexibility, we can get caught up in old scenarios, or future catastrophes - neither of which is real in the present.
- When faced with a predator thousands of years ago we can see that it would be essential for there to be the idea that there is invariably a right, precise and perfect solution to human problems and that nothing else will do. In our less threatening and more complex world we tend to get caught in the straightjacket of fight or flight responses, caught in the level of the 'problem', and we lose our ability to make creative choices, and access our own resourcefulness.

Where to get help

- Speak to a close friend, a family member, a tutor.
- Make an appointment with your GP.
- Make an appointment at the counselling service to discuss these problems further and discuss how counselling might help you.

Websites

www.phobics-society.org.uk

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info/anxpo.htm

www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/coping_relaxation.shtml

www.bbc.co.uk/health/conditions/mental_health/coping_stress.shtml

Conclusion

Remember that the aim is not to eliminate anxiety from your life (even if this were possible). It is normal and positive to be anxious some of the time. What is important, and what you owe to yourself, is to find ways of handling your anxiety so that it becomes a creative part of your life. You can try any of the strategies above which seem to appeal to you. You also need to realise that you are not alone or abnormal because of your anxiety, and that help and support is available from friends or family or from a trained professional. With a counsellor you might begin to tackle a specific anxiety state such as a phobia as well as working on questions of insecurity or self-esteem or more long-standing emotional or relationship difficulties. A counsellor will be able to help you address some of the ways in which your anxiety restricts you.

When to seek help

Anxiety can affect your health and your life more generally when it becomes chronic and severe so it is important to seek help when this is the case. In particular, if you have tried the ideas above and you still feel things have not improved, or if the fears are difficult to control, or if the anxiety is stopping you living a normal life or is preventing you from enjoying certain activities, then you should seriously consider seeking help.

Lowered Self-Esteem & Anxiety

There is a strong link between low/lowered self-esteem and strong levels of anxiety/stress.

- To be able to keep in a balanced enough connection to life, relate healthily to everyday demands, and to be able to adjust flexibly to changing circumstances, a person needs to be able to trust in their own inner resources/capabilities as well as have the confidence to access and indeed believe that they can access outside support.
- You could say that stress/a continuing experience of anxiety is the result of an imbalance between demands or perceived demands made, and a person's own personal resources or perceived personal resources to deal with these demands.
- With low self-esteem we will have difficulty in accepting what is possible/not possible for us, and trusting to an inherent human instinct about knowing on a deep level what is right for us. We will have difficulty in setting boundaries, being able to say 'no', and will easily get overwhelmed.
- It is likely that we will get into comparisons about what others are seemingly doing which we are not, which will feed our sense of inferiority already present, and will create yet more anxiety and stress. Competition on this level is not helpful, because it is not creative. It is coming from what may be a quite deep-rooted feeling of not being good enough.

How to help yourself

In situations of strong/extreme anxiety a person's whole make-up (thoughts, emotions and body) tightens up and becomes constricted. This leads to a feeling of top heaviness or lack of groundedness, and leads to a sense of disconnection and loneliness. It is as if they were in a sealed off compartment.

They feel isolated and unsupported. So what can you do if you find yourself suffering from some form of debilitating anxiety like this?

- First of all, it is important to remind yourself that anxiety is normal. This is a response to danger designed through evolution to help us survive, but it may be less useful to us now. It is important too to remember that we all do need anxiety to motivate us. Check out whether this really is anxiety you are feeling or is it excitement, or anticipation or necessary nerves?
- Try to identify what kind of worry you have. Anxiety takes different forms and expressions. These forms include:

Worry which might be described as going over and over a specific problem beyond what is needed to produce a solution.

General anxiety which involves widespread anxiety in a number of aspects of your life.

Specific Anxiety over a certain very clear situation like an exam.

Phobia which involves an excessive fear of a situation, place or object.

Hypochondria which is an exaggerated concern about having an illness.

Panic Attack which can be described as a sudden uncontrollable triggering of physical anxiety symptoms.

gently with the sensations themselves rather than following the yarns that your frightened mind might spin, the reality is that the sensations will gradually subside/dissolve.

- Try carrying a card with the word 'AWARE' written on it. The 'A' reminds you to accept the anxiety. The 'W' to watch it and measure it (on a scale of 1 to 10 just how anxious are you?). The 'A' encourages you to act as normally as you can. The 'R' to repeat these three steps over again. The 'E' reminds you to expect positive things to happen, rather than expecting the worst and reaching drastic conclusions about your situation. It is important to try to remind yourself that a panic attack is not physically dangerous, but an inappropriate fight or flight mechanism. If you can step outside of the experience and monitor it, this will certainly help.
- Try picturing, with as much detail and in as much reality as you can, a person you trust or who cares about you and imagine the person is with you looking after you and offering encouragement.
- Try reminding yourself that the attack will end.
- Try reminding yourself of any previous situations when you have handled similar situations well.

Panic Attacks

Sometimes you might suffer from a more severe anxiety state such as a panic attack. These experiences can be very frightening and involve tension in the chest, very rapid breathing and a panicky feeling that you might be going mad or even having a heart attack. What to do?

- Try running up and down the stairs. If this was a heart attack you couldn't do this. You are actually having an extreme but rational 'fight or flight' reaction, not anything too fearful.
- Try to breathe deeply and regularly. Breathe in over 7 beats and out over 11. The actual number is not critical (and 7/11 might be too long for you) but what is important is that the out-breath is longer than the in-breath. You can actually use this technique in all kinds of anxiety-provoking situations (before speaking in public, before an exam etc) to calm yourself or to relax yourself to prepare to sleep.
- Try sitting down, and taking a few slow, deep breaths, taking longer on the out-breath than on the in-breath as described above. Encourage yourself to consciously relax tense muscles, one area at a time, from your feet up to your head. Some people prefer to work from the head to the ground, and finish with a feeling of relaxed 'groundedness', with your feet firmly but gently planted. Try whichever approach feels right for you. Pay particular attention to the areas of the body where you know you hold your tension. Many people hold tension in the neck and shoulder area, so check for this and try to release the muscular tension.
- Try to just stay with the sensation of the fear/feelings, rather than get caught up with thoughts about them. The thoughts/fantasies about the feelings will always be much worse than the sensations themselves, and will just increase the level of the panic. By staying

You may have some or a combination of these types of anxiety and you may feel that these forms of anxiety are long-standing with a long history (chronic) or sharp and in the present (acute). You could then ask yourself the following questions to identify the sort of anxiety you have. It will help to be better informed and allow you to monitor yourself and gain some sense of control over the anxiety:

- decide if time duration makes this a chronic or acute condition
 - place it in a general group
 - locate triggers which lead to your anxiety
 - identify as precisely as possible how it is experienced and expressed
- Gaining control and perhaps talking to a counsellor about your more specific anxiety will help you to stop being anxious about being anxious. You may not be able to control or relieve all of the symptoms but remember that some anxiety is a normal and necessary part of our lives. It is especially important to bear this in mind because anxiety tends to escalate when we start worrying about worrying.
 - Review the stressful circumstances in your life. You might be able to find some practical ways to reduce these sources of stress. These might include:
 - saying 'no' to things you don't want to do
 - giving up unnecessary, time-wasting activities
 - facing up to work problems by talking to a tutor, supervisor or whoever
 - devising a realistic and organised plan of action to revise or tackle specific work projects
 - asking for help feedback or information
 - discussing a problem you have in a relationship

- Try to adopt a more rational approach and challenge some of those negative thoughts.
 - Are you judging yourself too harshly? for things that aren't your responsibility?
 - Are you jumping to conclusions? ■ Are you concentrating too much on the future and frightening yourself as a result?
 - Are you seeing things in black and white terms?
 - Are you comparing yourself to others and assuming that everyone else is fine?
 - Are you blaming yourself

It may take some time and some effort to take on those long-held beliefs, so don't blame yourself if you don't turn them around straight away.

- Maybe you really need to face up to the situation. It may help to confront rather than always avoid that anxiety-provoking situation. Anxiety can occur in certain situations and then it becomes firmly associated with that situation. If you can make yourself stay in that feared situation long enough, the anxiety will reduce. Try to take the less feared situations first, and deal with those, and then move on to something more challenging. Ask for the help of friends who could accompany you. Challenge yourself, pushing the boundaries of safety but do it gradually. Expose yourself to these scenarios in small but increasing steps.
- It is important to try to connect beyond your limited perspective by accessing the support of another person, be it a professional,

or a trustworthy friend. Feeling close to someone might help you to put the anxiety in context and even challenge some of the fixed negative perspectives you have been holding on to. A counsellor too will be able to help you with this, as well as looking at and addressing the deeper causes of potential difficulties with regard to inner security, self-esteem and confidence. Joining a workshop, or support group will help you to share experiences so that you don't feel so alone with your problems.

- An important aspect might be (possibly with the help of friends or professionals) to see how you might need to re-arrange your life in some way. Where has balance got lost in your life, and what steps can you take to address this? Quite often the balance of work, rest and relaxation needs attending to. Maybe some practical re-balancing needs to be done at work or college itself. Maybe time away from work/college needs to be re-balanced in the direction of activities which allow you to switch off or nurture yourself.
- Relaxation is key and some people need to learn how to relax or give themselves permission to do so. There are of course numerous ways of relaxing from taking up a sport, doing breathing exercises, listening to music, meditating, allowing yourself to have fun and switch off. Relaxation creates expansion. It offers us the space to accept ourselves, and from that place feel empowered and discover that unexpectedly we do have choices. Some people find that establishing safe and cosy rituals (rather than fixed and damaging ones) helps them to trigger a feeling of relaxation. They might, for example, have a special cosy chair where they always drink from their favourite mug at a certain special time of day. The important thing is to be creative, to look after yourself and have fun with it.

