

Understanding Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is not an illness that you either have or do not have – everyone has experienced anxiety.

We can all remember stressful times when we have felt anxious, like going for job interview or going to the dentist. That is perfectly normal. But anxiety is a problem when:

- it is experienced frequently or
- if it occurs in situations that should not really be stressful.

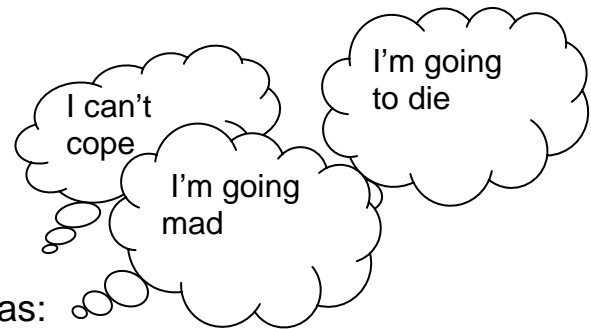
When someone is anxious, they experience physical feelings and worrying thoughts. This can make it hard to do even simple tasks and so they begin to avoid things. Often the person does not understand why they feel as they do. When they are relaxed they can see that their worries are over the top, but when the anxiety builds up they feel overwhelmed once again.

The effects of anxiety

Anxiety affects: how we think, what we do and how our body reacts.

1. How we think

When anxiety is out of control, people describe having thoughts such as:



These thoughts flash automatically into their heads when they are anxious.

Two things should be remembered about ***automatic thoughts***

- i. they are irrational and unrealistic – you will not die or go mad
- ii. they end up making you feel more anxious – if you think that you are not going to cope, you will worry even more.

Learning to control such thoughts can help you to handle your anxiety.

2. What we do

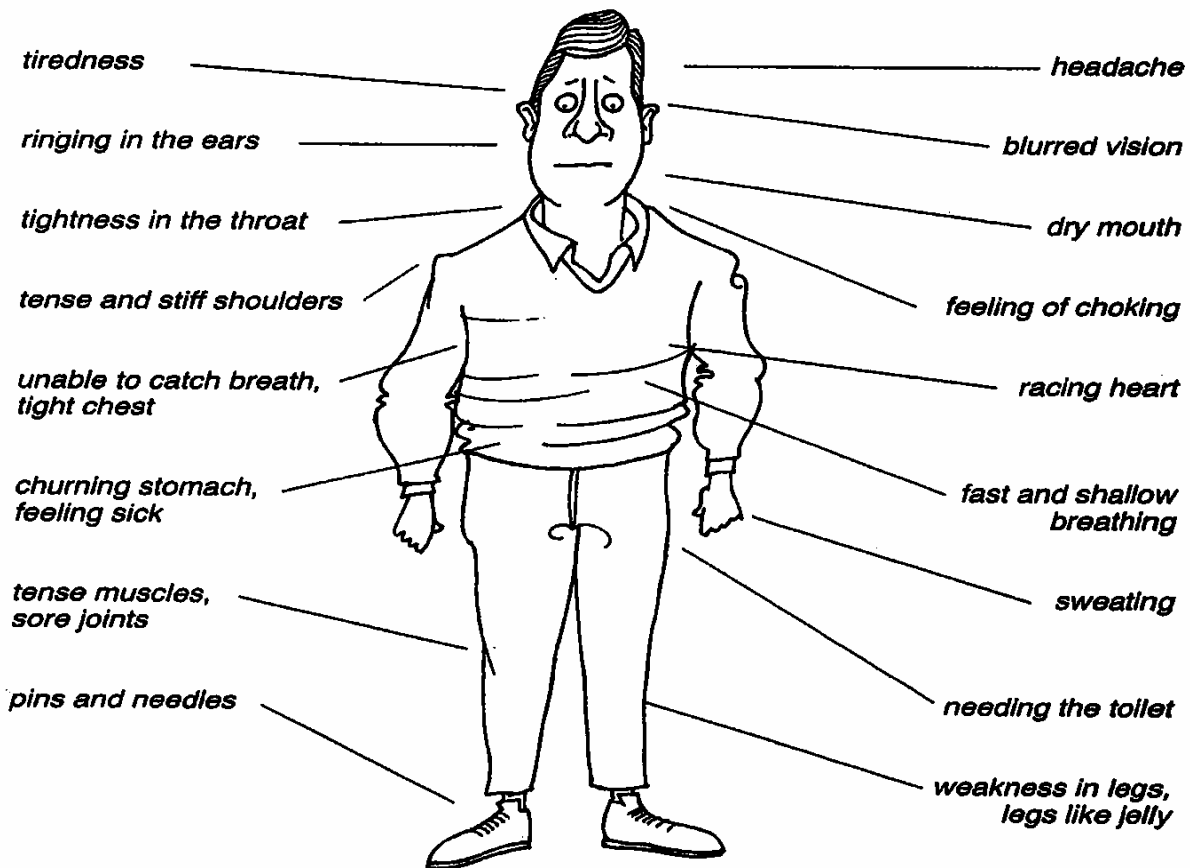
People suffering from anxiety often ***avoid things***, e.g. going out alone or chatting to people. They usually do this because they think that they will cope badly, e.g. they will panic or make a fool of themselves. By avoiding the situation, they feel better. But ***in the long term avoidance always makes the problem worse***. This is because more and more anxiety gets associated with the avoided thing and so it gets harder and harder to face up to it.

Anxiety can also make people feel that ***they must do certain things*** e.g. they might start repeatedly checking to see if doors are locked or plugs pulled out, or they might clean the house much more than it needs. Anxiety can also lead to other behaviours such as talking too fast or mixing up words. Being aware of these behaviours can make you feel more anxious.

3. How our bodies react

There are many **physical symptoms of anxiety** (see the picture below). The symptoms are very unpleasant and sometimes seem to appear for no reason. People worry that they have a serious physical problem or that something terrible is going to happen. It is important to know that **these symptoms are not dangerous** and will not do any damage to you even if they are severe.

If you look at the picture below, you may recognise some of these feelings. Most people will feel only some of these, not all.



Taken from *How To Manage Anxiety* (p.6) by Nicola Stuckey and Neil Millar © 2003

What causes anxiety?

Our lives and personalities

Some people have had difficult experiences earlier in life and this can make them more likely to get anxious. Other people have always been “the worrying type”. For many people, anxiety problems begin following a time of stress. E.g. they have difficulties at work or in a relationship, have been bereaved, are in poor health or have money worries. Stress can cause physical changes in the body and make it more likely that anxiety begins.

Changes in our body

When you are stressed, **adrenalin** gets released into your body. This is a chemical messenger which makes your body ready to run away or fight what it thinks is dangerous or threatening – **the fight/flight response**.

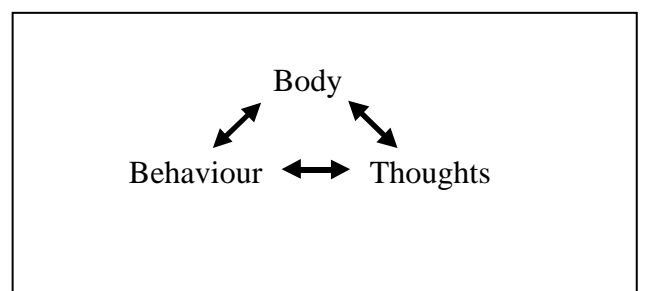


When we were cave people, this was useful, as we were living in the wild and faced many dangers that were threatening to us. Obviously, this does not happen to us in the same way nowadays, but there are times when our body feels we are in danger and that harm might come to us: for example, if we are nearly knocked down by a car, or if climbing up a high step ladder or if hearing a sudden loud noise. In such situations the body goes “on the alert” ready for action (e.g. heart goes faster and we breathe quicker). But we can also react in the same way to things that worry us, like being criticised. When someone is finding a lot of things worrying, then the body gets into the habit of being “on alert” and physical symptoms of anxiety develop.

When adrenalin is released, the feelings in our body change and can make us feel horrible.

What keeps anxiety going?

You may first notice anxiety in either thoughts, behaviour or body. But your anxiety reaction in each area feeds into the others. This keeps the body “on alert” and creates **a vicious circle** that keeps the anxiety going.



Anxiety conditions

Sometimes the effects of anxiety are experienced in a specific way and are recognised as a particular anxiety condition. The most common anxiety conditions are:

- Free floating or generalised anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Phobias including agoraphobia, social phobia, animal phobias and claustrophobia
- Obsessive-compulsive reactions
- Post traumatic stress disorder

People suffering from anxiety will often also experience feelings and symptoms of depression.

Overcoming anxiety problems

You can learn to manage your anxiety so that it stops being a problem. Sometimes you can do this by following the advice in books or leaflets or getting support from self-help groups. But if the problem seems too difficult to manage alone, then there are people who can help you.

How to get help

If you think that you need help with anxiety problems, see your GP or speak to your nurse or health visitor. She or he may be able to advise you about books that you can use and if necessary, can refer you to someone, e.g. a clinical psychologist, who can help you learn the skills you need to overcome your anxiety problems.