

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is common. It is the normal response to danger or stress and only becomes a problem when it is out of proportion to a situation or if it goes on too long.

Anxiety is not damaging. It cannot cause physical or mental harm, but it can make life difficult when it gets out of control. When it does, thinking and doing, and even the most simple things can become an enormous strain.

Anxiety is crucial to our survival because it prepares us for coping with stress. It is the trigger for hormonal changes in our bodies which enables us to cope with danger by preparing us for fight or flight. This produces many of the bodily feelings which we can associate with anxiety such as:

tense muscles	racing heart
rapid breathing	sweating

When we are anxious our thinking patterns also change the most common being preoccupation with the problem and not noticing other things.

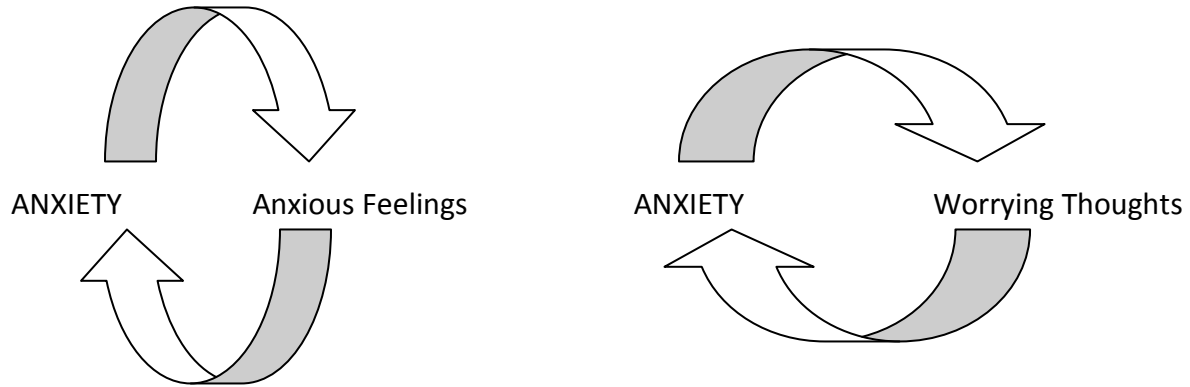
In the short term these changes are helpful because our bodies are prepared for physical action and our minds become focused on the immediate problem. The changes evolved to be an immediate response to stress which was switched off as soon as the danger passed. If these reactions are not switched off, the bodily sensations become more unpleasant and result in:

muscular pains	weak legs
sweating profusely	trembling
difficulty breathing	churning stomach
pounding heart	

Thinking will be more focused on worrying:

- Always fearing the worst worrying the problem is permanent
- Thinking negatively
- Believing the problem is physical

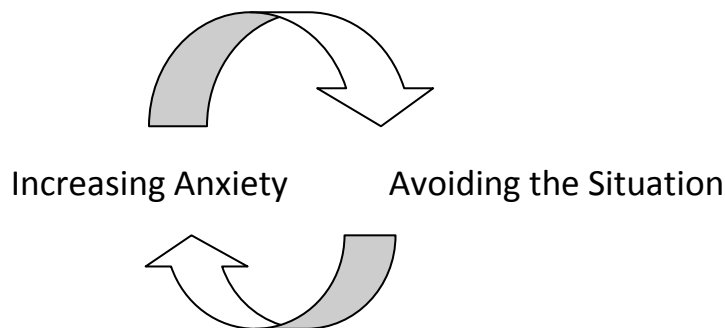
At this point anxiety itself can become distressing and when this happens a cycle is set up and the worrying can easily get out of control.



At times of stress our behavior can change too:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| fidgeting | nail biting |
| increased drinking | running away |
| avoiding situations | smoking more |
| rushing around | comfort eating |

The most common response to fear is running away, but the relief from avoiding is only temporary, then the situation becomes increasingly difficult to face and another cycle develops.



What can I do to control my anxiety?

You can learn to break these cycles of increasing anxiety by developing practical ways of overcoming the unpleasant symptoms. These methods are particularly useful:

- ✚ Learning to relax
- ✚ Learning to control distressing thoughts
- ✚ Learning to face the fear

By using these approaches, the unhelpful cycles described above can be brought under control. These methods of control do not necessarily come naturally. They are skills which need to be learned through regular practice. Developing the skill of anxiety management is rather like learning to play a musical instrument or learning another language: if you want to do it properly, you have to find time to practice. With practice you will develop coping skills to use whenever you are under stressor anxious. You will then be able to control unpleasant feelings and to face difficult situations.

Get to know your anxiety

Anxiety is different for each of us. We do not all experience the same bodily sensations, each of us has our own worrying thoughts and we each behave differently when under stress. In addition, triggers for anxiety vary from person to person. Before you can begin to learn how to manage anxiety, you must understand your own problem. You can do this by keeping a record of when you are anxious and noting how you feel, think, and what you do. It is also useful to rate your stress level on a 0-10 scale of increasing anxiety. Keep a note of your anxiety for 1 to 2 weeks and then look back over your entries. You should find that you can answer the questions:

What things or situations trigger *my* anxiety?

What are *my* bodily feelings and *my* anxious thoughts when I am stressed?

What differing levels of anxiety do different situations cause?

What do I tend to do when I am anxious?
What helps *me* to cope with my anxiety?

Get to know your coping skills

The last question is particularly important as you distinguish between the coping strategies which are helpful in the long run and those which might make you feel better in the short term but are not helpful over time.

Long term coping strategies would include: taking exercise doing some yoga, or talking to yourself in a soothing, constructive way. All of these are beneficial immediately and in the long run.

Short term coping would include: relying on tranquillizers or alcohol, avoiding difficult situations, or scolding yourself. Be especially careful not to turn to stimulants when you are under stress as they will increase the unpleasant bodily symptoms and make coping more difficult. The sorts of stimulants which you might use are alcohol, cigarettes, chocolate, chocolate drinks, coffee, and cola drinks.

Don't feel that you have to abandon your short term coping strategies at once: this can be too alarming a prospect. Instead think how you might integrate more helpful coping skills into your repertoire of techniques.

When you are familiar with your own problem anxiety, you will be ready to develop a new set of strategies to suit *your* needs.