

Understanding Your Anxiety Response

Anxiety is your body's way of keeping you safe. It's a messaging system that is designed to alert you to possible danger and is purposefully unpleasant in nature to grab your attention and compel you to act quickly. The feelings associated with anxiety have purpose and most of the time, are helpful to keep us safe. The problem is that your body can't tell the difference between a real threat and something you're worried *might* happen, like being judged at work, speaking in public, missing deadlines, being rejected etc. So, your brain treats both the same way.

What Happens in Your Body

When your brain perceives a threat (again, tiger OR speaking in public), your nervous system kicks into "fight or flight" mode. Your heart rate goes up, you might feel shaky, your breathing gets faster and shallower, there is a felt sense of discomfort or doom, and your brain shifts its focus to problems or what potentially could go wrong. It plays those thoughts repeatedly. This all happens automatically, and you are not in control of it. These physical sensations feel uncomfortable and scary, but they're your body trying to help you.

The good news: these sensations don't mean anything bad is actually happening. They're just your nervous system being overprotective.

Avoidance

We learn to associate some situations with worsening symptoms. Because the feelings and thoughts are so unpleasant, we adopt a variety of strategies to either avoid provoking these feelings and thoughts or to help us cope. We might start to avoid these anxiety-provoking situations, like talking in public. We may attempt to distract ourselves from the thoughts and feelings. We may pressure ourselves to please others or be perfect to avoid criticism or judgement. All of these behaviours may temporarily make us feel better and more in control, but these behaviours ultimately make anxiety worse. Avoidance keeps us from being able to reduce anxiety feelings and learn to tolerate what's left.

Putting the Brakes On

Your nervous system has another mode called the "rest and digest" system. When this system is active, your body calms down. Your heart rate slows, your breathing deepens, and your muscles relax. You can activate this system *right now*, even while you're anxious, by changing how you respond to these anxious feelings. When your body believes it's safe, the anxiety starts to ease.

You can build a sense of safety by:

- Slowing your breathing.
- Imagining places that are safe
- Putting labels on thoughts
- Engaging your sensory system