

## Fight | Flight | Freeze

You might have heard about the *Fight or Flight Response* before. When we are confronted with a threatening or feared situation, our bodies respond immediately (like a reflex) to protect us from danger. It is part of our biological protection mechanism to protect us from harm. Anxiety is a very helpful emotion that is “adaptive” in these feared situations. As human beings we have evolved to adapt in this way. Anxiety serves this very important function around safety and self-protection. It is a very helpful emotion and most of the time, it is good for us.

While Fight or Flight has been well known as a response mechanism, more recently anxiety and stress researchers have also identified *Freeze* - a third, very common, response to dangerous or traumatic situations. It is also an adaptive mechanism that is there for our protection.

### Activation of Fight | Flight | Freeze

Imagine that something very dangerous is about to happen to you, without warning. It might be that you are crossing the street and a sports car starts speeding and swerving toward you (or, in the case of our ancestors, a predator animal such as a bear). You would want your brain to make a very immediate calculation of danger, and activate a behavioural reflex that will get you out of that situation. Perhaps you will exhibit one of the below responses...

**Fight mode:** Yelling, waving, screaming, swearing, trying to make yourself as big and threatening as possible. The dangerous person or animal might be deterred.

**Flight mode:** Run, as fast as possible, in a direction of safety. You will avoid the danger and outrun it or wait until it passes.

**Freeze mode:** Stop, startled, do nothing, wait for the danger to pass. To move might further jeopardise your safety and the danger may be able to avoid you.

To not become anxious and activate the fight | flight | freeze response would put you in increased peril. You do not want to take precious time to think about your response, you want your body and brain to quickly take over for you in the interests of your self-protection.

### Unhelpful Anxiety

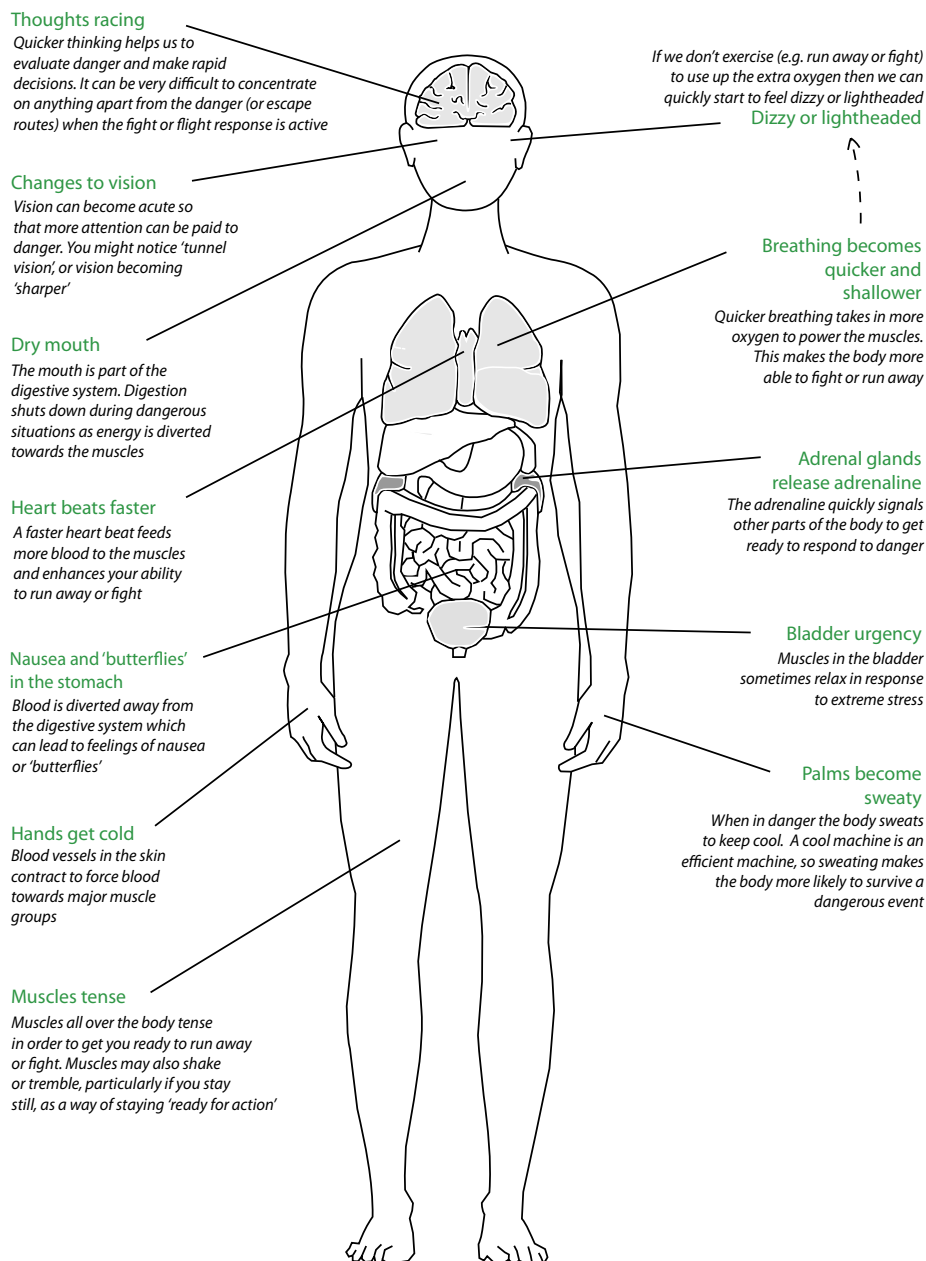
Anxiety is good for us (as are all of our feelings, they all serve a purpose and are essential to life as a social human being). However, psychological conditions can develop where the fight | flight | freeze response starts to become activated in non-life threatening situations. Our complex “human” qualities – the very same ones that separate us from the animal world, like abstract thinking, philosophy, societal mechanisms, the appreciation of art, the pursuit of truth and knowledge, spirituality, meaning making – are also responsible for us experiencing unhelpful anxiety. The very *idea* that a situation is threatening, the anticipation of threat, the linking events with meaning, beliefs, philosophies, biases and pre-conceptions, these qualities make us vulnerable to debilitating “clinical” anxiety. Our biological emotional system overwhelms us and we feel out of control. Understanding that these responses are healthy, normal – just a little misplaced – is important to learning how to cope with anxiety.

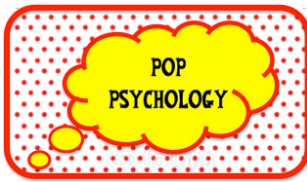
## A Biological Response Mechanism

The behavioural reflex made possible in fight | flight | freeze is a result of a complex biological mechanisms, involving the input of sensory information, specific brain regions, chemical and hormonal releases, and electrical firing in our nervous system. It is important to understand a bit about this biology if you find that your struggle with anxiety. Accepting that these responses are ok, that they will pass, that you **will not die** from anxiety, and learning how to directly impact our biological systems to aid the calming response, is central to your overcoming anxiety.

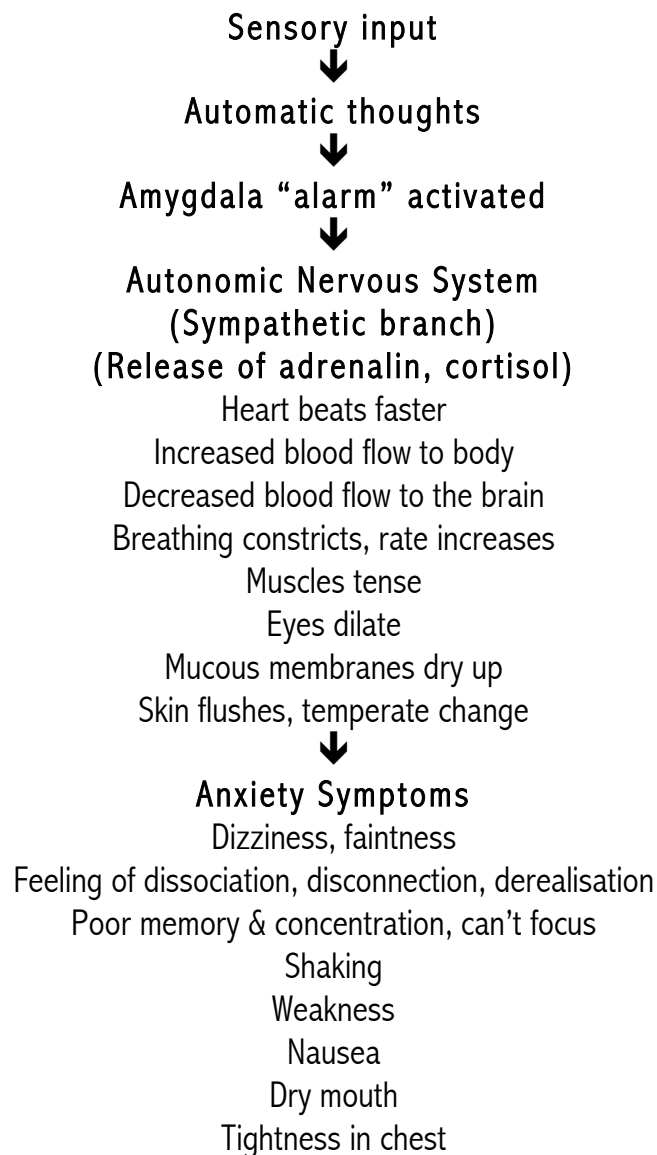
### Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.

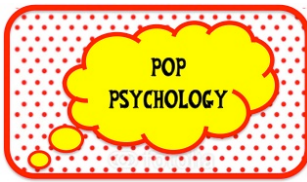




## The Biological Fight | Flight | Freeze Response:



The release of adrenalin (along with other biochemical processes) is responsible for much of the autonomic nervous system response. It is a jolt to your nervous system that ignites the fight | flight | freeze behaviours, and it has pretty notable physical effects. You might think about times in your life that you have experienced scared, surprised, and thrilled, when you are hit with a bodily response that is beyond your control. Maybe going on a rollercoaster, running in a race, or seeing a scary movie. You scream involuntarily, you get “butterflies”, and your “hair stands on end”. But after a certain time, these physical responses die down. This is because, once your brain registers that the threat has passed, another biological system is activated (the parasympathetic nervous system), which triggers a relaxation response.



## Fight | Flight | Freeze

### Stress and Fight | Flight | Freeze

Stress is not an emotion *per se*. Stress is a word used to describe our experiences of life events and their impacts upon us. We may say that we feel “stressed” and this term encapsulates any number of overwhelming emotional states (anxiety, sadness, anger, or a complex blend of feelings). In life, it is not so much what happens to us (what “stressors” we experience), but how we interpret these events, and how our body responds both biologically and behaviourally, that we would term “stressful”. When we are faced with increased stress, our bodies respond in a similar fashion to that described in intense trauma situations, just on a lesser scale. Below is a table describing some of the common fight | flight | freeze responses that we can demonstrate when we are stressed.

<i>Fight</i>	<i>Flight</i>	<i>Freeze</i>
Easily angered	Avoid situations	Tense up
Yell, punch, throw	Stay home	Go quiet, non-responsive
Blame others	Decline invitations	Daydream
Denial	Distract ourselves	Fantasise
Defensiveness	Procrastinate	Numbness
Passive-Aggressive	Use of drugs/alcohol	Distraction
Harbouring resentments	Self-harm	Self-harm
Self-harm		

We tend to have our own preferences toward fight, flight or freeze, which are not so much in our overt control (although, for example, we might tend toward flight or freeze because we are socialized not to become angry), but dictated by our own biological makeup and personality, or by the circumstances of the stressful or traumatic events themselves. A child who is bullied might be able to “stand up to” their attacker, physically or verbally, and if this works they might use *Fight* as a default response to stress. Another person might experience chronically stressful situations for which there is no option for self-defence or escape, and they might revert to the *Freeze* response as a general habit.

Knowing about Fight | Flight | Freeze is important to overcoming anxiety, as therapy is designed to directly impact upon thoughts and threat perception, activating relaxation through the parasympathetic nervous system, and practicing helpful coping behaviours.