

# Anxiety

## WHAT IS IT AND HOW DOES IT DEVELOP?

### What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to the expectation of threat. The purpose of fear and anxiety is to prepare the body and mind to deal with threat, to protect the person. Some anxiety is productive in helping you meet challenges and dangers in the environment. So a certain level of anxiety is conducive to performance, but intense anxiety can adversely affect performance. Symptoms of anxiety are connected to a fight-flight-freeze physiological activation. When we perceive threat, our bodies trigger the release of adrenaline and noradrenaline, which provides the body systems energy with which to face the threat. All anxiety problems are about a non-functional, non-adaptive or inappropriate response to danger. There is something about that person's individual makeup that causes them to fear objects or situations in which there is no actual threat to their safety.

### The 3 Response Systems

- The physiological system – refers to the changes that occur in an individual's body when he or she is in an anxiety-provoking situation.
- The cognitive or mental system – refers to the types of thoughts typically reported by people in anxiety-provoking situations.
- The behavioural system – refers to what people actually do (how they behave) in a situation that they find anxiety-provoking.

### *The Physiological Component*

This aspect of anxiety describes the feelings you get in your body when you are anxious. This is a very important part of anxiety and often the first that people think about. Below is a list of the physical symptoms that people sometimes experience when they are anxious. Obviously, you can experience these symptoms for other reasons, however if you notice that you get these symptoms only when you are worried or frightened about something, then the symptoms are most likely part of your anxiety experience.

- Palpitations (heart pounding)
- Tachycardia (hear racing)
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Smothering sensations
- Lump in the throat
- Shakiness (hands, head, knees)
- Blurred vision
- Headaches
- Depersonalisation (feeling as if you or your surroundings are not the way they should be)
- Muscle aches
- Tightness in the chest
- Pain in the chest
- Ringing in the ears
- Shortness of breath
- Diarrhoea
- Flushing
- Blushing
- Chills
- Parathesias (tingling or numbness in the fingers, toes, fac

About a third of the general population have had a very particular combination of physical symptoms called a 'panic attack'. A panic attack is a quick rush of anxiety that includes at least four of the symptoms listed above, and come on very quickly. People sometimes say that a panic attack feels like a sudden rush of adrenaline.

### ***The Cognitive Component***

"Cognitive" is the word psychologists use for thoughts and thought processes. Anxious thoughts often involve a prediction that something bad will happen. For people with social anxiety, these thoughts could involve negative predictions of their own performance ("I won't know what to say to her", "I'll stumble over my words and look dumb"), or of what other people think of them ("He'll think I'm weird", "They'll think I'm boring", "She thinks I'm incompetent").

Sometimes it is the anticipation of an event that makes us the most anxious. Sometimes the thoughts are potentially true, but they might represent our worst fears, rather than what is actually likely to happen. Learning to think differently in situations that make you anxious is an important step toward overcoming your anxiety.

### ***The Behavioural Component***

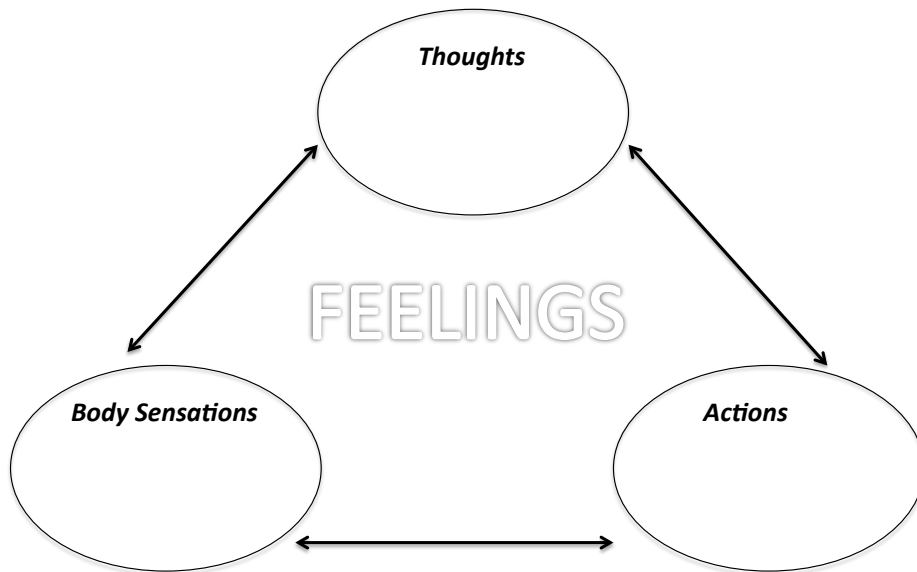
It is often helpful to think about the behavioural component of anxiety as having two parts of its own. The first is *what you do in an anxiety-provoking situation*. Think of the anxious young man who looks down at his shuffling feet as he attempts to talk with an attractive young woman. Will this kind of behaviour promote a positive response from this woman, or contribute to his problem of meeting people (and thereby confirm his beliefs of himself as totally unappealing?)

The second part of the behavioural component of anxiety is *avoidance*. Avoidance involves either not doing something that frightens you or doing it in a way that you stay away from the most frightening aspects of the anxiety-provoking situation. For example, if you experience social anxiety when talking with unfamiliar people, you might turn down an invitation to attend a party where you won't know many people.

Avoidance behaviour is a particularly interesting aspect of anxiety because it is an effective solution to reducing your anxiety. Let's say you manage to avoid an anxiety-provoking situation, or leave when you begin feeling anxious. What you learn from this behaviour is that avoidance works, it makes you feel better. The next time you are confronted with a similar situation, you are more likely to avoid, because that is the easiest option. However, it is only a short-term solution. It may decrease anxiety initially but it usually creates other bad feelings and problems as well. Avoiding a few situations can quickly snowball into a general pattern of avoiding lots of situations.

### The Vicious Cycle of Anxiety

When a person becomes anxious, he or she rarely experiences just one of the components of anxiety. In fact, the cognitive, physiological and behavioural components of anxiety interact with one another, and an increase or decrease in one may cause increases or decrease in the other two. As you see in the example over the page, all three components work together and can create a downward spiral that leads to missed opportunities and bad feelings. As you might guess, the solution involves interrupting the process before it gets out of control. If you can learn to recognise the signs that the anxiety spiral is starting and you have the tools to change what is happening, then you can begin to overcome the anxiety and take charge of your life.



**What responses have you noticed in your child?**

Physiological

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Cognitive

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Behavioural

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# Factors that may be involved in the development and continuation of your child's anxiety

## Biological/Genetic Influences and Temperament

There is strong evidence indicating that, in many cases, anxiety is transmitted within families. There is also research to suggest that some children are born with a lower threshold for tolerating new situations and/or people. In other words, these children are born with a nervous system that predisposes them to become anxious about a situation earlier than other children.

## Trauma and Stressful Events

Some children may become highly anxious after being exposed to an event that was very traumatic or stressful for them. For example, a child who is badly mauled by a Rottweiler dog may develop an intense fear of dogs in general.

## Learning Influences

In many ways, this category is the most relevant for our purposes, since these are the only factors that are changeable. Importantly, learning influences are typically seen as maintaining (rather than causal) factors. Learning influences refer to the way in which a child is influenced by his or her environment. For children, the most important sources of influence are usually: family, school and friends.

There are many different types of learning influences that may play a part in maintaining a child's anxiety. Some of these are:

- **Attention** - anxiety is often accidentally rewarded with attention, from siblings, teachers, and parents
- **Accidental pay-offs** - a coincidental association between anxious behaviour and some kind of reward
- **Escalation ("Anxiety avoidance") traps** - avoidance protects anxiety
- **Modelling influences** - anxiety and ways of coping with anxiety can be demonstrated to the child by those around them
- **Expectations** - the "self-fulfilling prophecy"

**Let's think about what factors have been the most important in the development and maintenance of your child's anxiety.**

List these below.



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