



Talking Therapies

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a completely normal and natural response to situations that we perceive as threatening. Everyone experiences anxiety, although the level of anxiety and the situations in which it presents itself can differ from person to person. For example, some people are terrified of speaking in front of a large audience, whereas other people are able to do this and remain calm.

Fight or Flight

Anxiety serves a very important function – to protect us from danger. When we are faced with a threat our bodies produce a surge of adrenaline that equips us to deal with that threat. This is commonly referred to as 'fight or flight'.



Imagine this scene: A caveman is out hunting for his dinner, when he is faced by a hungry tiger.

What does he need to do in order to survive?

He needs to either fight the tiger off or run away!

In order to fight or flee, the body must prepare itself in a number of ways:

- The brain sends messages to the body to pump adrenalin into the bloodstream and large skeletal muscles of the arms and legs
- As a result the heart pumps faster and needs more oxygen
- The body needs to cool down so it may sweat causing clamminess or capillaries come to the surface of the skin resulting in blushing
- To be as light as possible there may be a need for the bowels to empty or frequent urination to occur

In modern life it is very unlikely that we will be faced with hungry tigers – but we are still exposed to real or imagined threats or stressors in daily life and our bodies respond to these with the same response. If the situation is not physically threatening (e.g. giving a presentation) then this response is not helpful for coping with the situation and can actually be quite frightening.

How common are anxiety problems?

About 1 in every 10 people will have difficulty with anxiety or a phobia at some point in their lives.

Physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Increased heart rate
- Sweating, trembling
- Blurred vision
- Nausea, indigestion or diarrhoea
- Dry mouth
- Headache/feeling light headed
- Butterflies in stomach
- Muscle tension

So if anxiety is a normal and natural reaction to threats, then why is it such a problem for me?

Anxiety becomes a problem when it starts to interfere with our ability to function in daily life. If it just goes on and on, or if it happens out of the blue, or for no obvious reason, it can make life very difficult.

This can happen when we begin to perceive neutral, safe situations as threatening. People who suffer from anxiety problems tend to *overplay* the threat in certain situations and at the same time *underplay* their ability to cope with that threat. This leads to the person feeling overwhelmed or out of their depth

Anxiety feels like fear

Thoughts that often occur:

- I'm in danger right now
- The worst possible scenario is going to happen
- I won't be able to cope with it

Behaviours might include:

- Avoiding people or places
- Not going out
- Going to certain places at certain times, e.g. shopping at smaller shops, at less busy times
- Only going with someone else
- Escape, leave early
- Go to the feared situation, but use coping behaviours to get you through: examples include: self talk, holding a drink, smoking more, fiddling with clothes or handbag, avoiding eye contact with others, having an escape plan, medication. These are called 'safety behaviours'.