

Managing Anxiety

PART ONE

Firstly, other words which mean the same as anxiety include; 'nerves': 'tension': 'fear': 'panic': 'shakes'. However, in this booklet we will stick to using the word anxiety to cover all the other words.

WHAT IS ANXIETY

Anxiety is a word we use to describe our feelings when we are frightened. So, if something frightens us, we get anxious. For example, if you are walking down a street and suddenly a vicious dog runs up to you, snarling and baring its teeth, you will almost certainly feel anxious because you are frightened that the dog will attack you.

Of course, in this situation, you can easily see what has made you anxious and so you will tend not to worry about it after it is over because it makes sense and it is quite normal and the anxiety will soon fade away. However, if we get those feelings of anxiety when nothing frightening has happened, we will tend to worry that there is something wrong with us. Most people who seek help because of anxiety are like this. They find themselves getting anxious when there is nothing happening to them which should make them feel that way. At this point we shall look in more detail at what is happening to people when they feel anxious.

Now anxiety really affects people in three ways:

Firstly, there are the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Secondly, there are the psychological symptoms of anxiety – what you feel and what you think when anxious.

We will list some of the feelings and symptoms for each of the three ways anxiety affects people.

(i) The PHYSICAL symptoms of anxiety include:

1. Heart racing – palpitations
2. Dizziness or light-headedness
3. Legs feeling weak, 'like jelly'
4. Stomach churning, 'butterflies', feeling sick
5. Shakiness (especially hands and arms)
6. Tingling sensations
7. Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing ('lump in throat')
8. Feeling hot and sweaty, flushed
9. Wanting to go to the toilet
10. Muscle tension
11. Rapid breathing, tight 'band' across chest

These are the main physical symptoms of anxiety. You may not experience all of them and of those you do experience some will be stronger than others. You may also suffer some other physical symptoms which are not here but which are related to the main symptoms in the list.

- (ii) The PSYCHOLOGICAL symptoms of anxiety. Generally these include what you feel when anxious (that is your emotions) and what you actually think and say to yourself when anxious.

Here is a list of the main feelings and thoughts people get when anxious.

1. Feeling frightened and panicky
2. Thinking that you might be losing your mind
3. Thinking that you might be having a heart attack
4. Feeling that you are losing control
5. Worrying that you may faint or be sick
6. Thinking that there may be something wrong with your brain (i.e. a tumour)
7. Worrying that people are looking at you and thinking that you might be acting strangely
8. Worrying that you might make a fool of yourself by doing or saying something silly
9. Wanting to escape and get to a safe place
10. Thinking that you may be having a stroke

You might not experience all these things and one thought or fear might be particularly strong. Again, there might be a particular worry which is not included here, but which is similar to one in the list.

- (iii) The BEHAVIOURAL symptoms of anxiety. These include the things you actually do when you are anxious. What you do will depend on the situation you find particularly stressful. Here are a few examples:

1. Walking or going by taxi in order to avoid buses
2. Making excuses to avoid going out or doing something
3. Only shopping when it's quiet or in small shops
4. Crossing the street to avoid people
5. Rushing out of places or situations when feeling anxious
6. Going to the toilet to escape from things
7. Not saying anything when with other people
8. Using props before you go out – i.e. having a drink or taking a tablet
9. Avoiding going out alone by always taking someone with you
10. In buildings, sitting near doors, at the end of rows or as far back as possible

Again, this is only a list of the main things people do when they are anxious and you may be able to think of other different things that you do. However, you will probably find that whatever it is you do, it comes down to either avoiding situations or escaping from them.

We will now look at each of the physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms of anxiety in more detail and show what is happening in your mind and your body when you are anxious and how what you do is important as well.

(i) The causes of the PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

To help you understand what is happening to your body when you get anxious, let's take an example of a situation in which anyone would experience the symptoms of anxiety

Imagine you are crossing a busy road, when suddenly you hear a loud horn go off a few feet away from you and a screech of brakes. What you will most likely do is immediately jump or run, even before you have had time to think what is happening. Having got out of the way of the car you'll then be left feeling a bit shaky with your heart thumping as well as some of the other symptoms in the list of physical symptoms. Now what has happened is that a split second after you heard that horn and screech of brakes, what we call the Anxiety Response in your brain has been 'switched on'. What the Anxiety Response does is prepare your body for immediate action in the face of danger. What this means in practice is the following:

1. Your heart rate shoots up: it does this as it can pump blood (energy) to the muscles of your arms and legs much more quickly, because it will be your arms and legs which will get you out of danger.
2. To keep your heart beating at this faster rate, you need extra oxygen to give the heart energy – so you breathe much more quickly as well to get this extra energy for the heart.
3. Because of the extra energy being sent to your arms and legs, the muscles are more tense, more ready to spring into action.
4. Because your arms and legs need this extra blood for the muscles, much of the blood which usually goes to the stomach area is redirected away from the stomach (which can cope with less during this emergency) and is sent to the arms and legs. This leads to the churning feeling in your stomach, the 'butterflies'.
5. Just as your stomach can go on with a reduced blood supply in order that your arms and legs get an extra supply, so also your brain can easily cope with less blood for the same reason. This leads to you feeling light-headed and dizzy.
6. As your heart is pumping blood more quickly around your body, especially to the muscles, your temperature increases so to cool your body down you perspire more. Hence you feel hot and sweaty.

All this is carried out by the Anxiety Response. As you can see from our example, the Anxiety Response is automatic; you do not consciously switch it on. This is because it needs to work immediately you are aware of the danger. The reason we all have this anxiety response which can be so quickly triggered off, is that thousands of years ago people experienced severe danger, such as the threat from wild animals, much more often than we do today. Therefore, those who could respond to danger more quickly were most likely to survive and so would be able to pass on this natural tendency to their children.

In the course of evolution this meant that eventually everyone would possess this ability, the Anxiety Responses. And essentially, we are the same today – we may not face quite so much danger in the shape of wild animals but we still have the same way of responding to danger and stress, as did our ancestors many years ago.

So, if you look again at the list of physical symptoms on Page 1 you will see that most of them are directly explained in our discussion of the Anxiety Response. Other symptoms such as shakiness and tingling are side-effects of the main symptoms – muscle tension.

To summarise: The physical symptoms of anxiety are due to the switching on of the Anxiety Responses. This is an ability we all need to help us deal with dangerous situations.

(ii) The PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

Now we will look at what you think and feel when your body is producing the physical symptoms. If you look back at the list of psychological symptoms, the main feature is a fear of losing control. If you don't know what the physical symptoms mean, you cannot understand what is happening to you and your body. This is where nearly everyone will tend to think the worst... "I'm having a heart attack!", "Am I going crazy?", "Am I going mad?". Of course these thoughts themselves will make you even more anxious and this leads to a vicious circle: - you experience the physical symptoms: you worry that they might mean something is seriously wrong with you: you then feel more anxious so that physical symptoms get worse and so on.

Sometimes your anxious thoughts and feelings may trigger off the physical symptoms. For example, you are about to go into a shop and suddenly the thought hits you "What if I panic?". This thought will trigger off the panic and the vicious circle will make it worse.

To summarise: The things you think when you feel anxious can often make the anxiety symptoms worse, and can start an anxiety attack off. This is why understanding the Anxiety Response is important as it will help you get rid of the incorrect anxiety provoking thoughts.

(iii) YOUR BEHAVIOUR – that is what you actually do when anxious

You may do one or more of the things we have already listed. However, perhaps the most important thing you do which keeps the anxiety going, is avoiding situations. If you do avoid a situation which makes you feel anxious, it may stop you feeling anxious in the short term. But, in the long term, it means that you will never get a chance to overcome your anxiety and will always feel frightened by the situation. If you avoid something once, probably next time will be even more difficult.

For example, if you turn away from the supermarket when you begin to feel anxious, the next time you go shopping you may find the fear comes on even stronger. Also once you start avoiding supermarkets, you may find yourself avoiding the shops as well.

Other things on the list, such as always taking a friend along with you when you go out, will also not help you overcome anxiety in the long run. You will come to rely on these ways of avoiding anxiety, rather than learning the better ways to deal with it.

To summarise: Avoiding situations makes them more difficult to cope with next time and more importantly never gives you a chance to overcome the anxiety.

This first part of the booklet has been written to help you understand anxiety by looking at the three aspects of anxiety and explaining them. However, before actually going on to Part Two of the booklet, in which we suggest ways you can control anxiety, we will suggest reasons you may have become anxious.

ANXIETY: WHY ME?

Now this is a difficult question to answer as each person who has an anxiety problem has developed it for slightly different reasons.

Nevertheless, there are some general reasons which lead to anxiety difficulties.

Firstly, there is evidence that people who experience what are known as Stressful Life Events are more prone to developing an anxiety problem. By stressful life events we mean anything which happens to you which significantly alters your life. This includes obviously undesirable things like losing your job, someone close to you dying, being involved in an accident etc. However, we also include things like moving house, being promoted, as stressful life events, simply because they will often increase tension/anxiety as well, even though they are not unpleasant in themselves.

Now we all suffer stressful life events at some time, but for some people, two or more stressful life events may occur quite closely together. For example, a person moves house and a few months later a good friend of his dies. That man may find that weeks after the death of his friend he is walking along when suddenly, and for no apparent reason, a panic attack hits him and he experiences the same thing as the person who wrote the account at the beginning of the booklet.

Why is this? What happened is that the first stressful life event – moving house – has made that person that bit more tense than he would be usually. (He will probably not even notice that anything is different). Given time, he would settle down back to the same normal level of tension as before he moved. However, the second stressful life event takes place before he is back to normal.

In other words, the death of his friend hit him when he is particularly vulnerable. This makes him much more tense than he is usually (although again he might not be aware of anything wrong).

What this means is that his anxiety level is very high and it only needs to be pushed a bit higher before Anxiety Response is triggered off. When this happens (and there won't seem to be an obvious reason for it at the time) he will experience an anxiety attack. However, as we have already seen he will not be aware of what is happening or why and this will almost certainly start off the sort of vicious circle we discussed earlier.

For example, in this case, when he has his first attack, he may worry that he is having a heart attack.

So even when the attack is over, that fear will still be there and as he worries about it he will be likely to start off an attack again, even if eventually his GP tries to reassure him that his heart is all right, so he becomes very frightened of the attacks themselves and consequently they occur more and more often. So, the above is an example of how many people often develop anxiety problems.

However, it is only an example, and of course your experience will be different in some ways. Whatever the general idea is that the normal Anxiety Response (which we all have) is triggered off in the person following a number of stresses. Not understanding what is happening leads to the anxiety becoming stronger – the person develops an anxiety problem.

Whatever the reasons you have become anxious, the first part of the booklet should help you understand that anxiety is not something to be feared, and that by knowing what the symptoms mean, you are a long way along the road to eventually controlling anxiety.

We will now go on to the second part to explain specific techniques to help you still further.

COPING WITH ANXIETY

1. The symptoms you experience when anxious will not harm you.
2. They may be unpleasant and distressing but they need not stop you doing anything.
3. Anxiety will not lead to you losing control in any way.
4. If you are feeling very anxious - try and let yourself go and relax.
5. 'Flow with' the anxiety. Do not fight it by tensing up.
6. Remember, that each time you cope with an anxiety attack in this way the next time you will find you will cope even better.
7. Try your very best not to avoid situations.
8. Confronting anxiety in difficult situations is the most effective way of learning to overcome anxiety.
9. Make sure you do not go back to the old incorrect ways of thinking.

The signs of stress and effects on behaviour

Physical

- Recurrent headaches
- Palpitations / breathlessness / chest pains
- Indigestion
- Diarrhoea, stomach cramps
- Sexual problems
- Loss of appetite
- Insomnia

Emotional

- Frequent feelings of anger and irritation
- Feeling gloomy / low
- Feeling tense
- Loss of sense of humour
- Loss of feelings of pleasure and joy
- Feeling tearful
- Ability to love and care impaired

Mental

- Failing memory and poor concentration
- Inability to reach satisfactory decisions
- Difficulty in dismissing problems from the mind

Effects on behaviour

- Emotional outbursts and aggression
- Excessive eating / loss of appetite
- Excessive drinking and smoking
- Accident proneness
- Inactivity
- Lack of interest in work avoidance of tasks
- Making mistakes
- Aggressive driving

Helping yourself through the stress curve

Under stress (rust out)

- Tackle the causes of being there
- Look for challenge, either in or out of work
- Talk to your line manager or someone who could help
- Build up skills to enable you to find a more challenging role
- Look after yourself in ways which use up surplus energy and keep yourself fit

Healthy stress (keeping fit)

- Watch out for warning signs and act on them
- Make sure, if you have a busy period, that you give yourself time to recover
- If you feel you are approaching the downward spiral to burn out, take immediate action to avoid it

Unhealthy stress (burn out)

- Immediately slow down the pace
- Talk to someone who can help
- Identify and tackle the causes of reaching this point
- Resolve to use strategies to remedy the situation
- Don't blame the situation on others and do nothing. Start now!

The six 'R's for stress management

Responsibility

- You are in control
- Establish priorities
- Say no
- Avoid 'should's, 'ought's and must's'

Reflection

- Know your stress triggers
- Be aware of stress symptoms
- Check the balance in your life

Relaxation

- Do something good for you
- Schedule time out
- Sit down, do nothing, learn to relax

Relationships

- Maintain supportive relationships
- Manage your relationships
- Improve your relationship with yourself

Refuelling

- Eat a balanced diet with high fibre, low salt and low cholesterol
- Be aware of poisons: caffeine, fats, nicotine, excessive alcohol

Recreation

- Have hobbies / interests
- Laugh
- Have fun
- Enjoy life