The Nature of Anxiety and Worry

The Nature of Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal and healthy reaction. It describes a series of changes in the body and in the way we think and behave that enable us to deal with threat or danger. These changes can be very useful if you have to respond quickly.

Consider the following:

> You are crossing a wide and busy road at a pedestrian crossing. You suddenly notice a truck that has failed to slow down and will probably not stop, and it is heading in your direction. You start running for the safety of the sidewalk some metres away. The brain becomes aware of danger. Automatically, hormones are released and the involuntary nervous system sends signals to various parts of the body to produce the changes listed below.

- The mind becomes alert.
- Blood clotting ability increases, preparing for possible injury.
- Heart rate speeds up and blood pressure rises.
- Sweating increases to help cool the body.
- Blood is diverted to the muscles, which tense, ready for action.
- Digestion slows down.
- Saliva production decreases, causing a dry mouth.
- Breathing rate speeds up. Nostrils and air passages in lungs open wider to get in air more quickly.
- Liver releases sugar to provide quick energy.
- Sphincter muscles contract to close the openings of the bowel and bladder.
- Immune responses decrease, which is useful in the short term to allow massive response to immediate threat, but can become harmful over a long period.

> And so you are able to run very quickly to the side of the road and escape being knocked down by the truck.

As you can see, this series of reactions, known as the "fight or flight" response, account for the many and varied feelings you can experience when you are anxious. In your mind you feel fear, apprehension, you are "on edge", "keyed up" and worried.

In your body, you may experience one or a number of the following sensations:

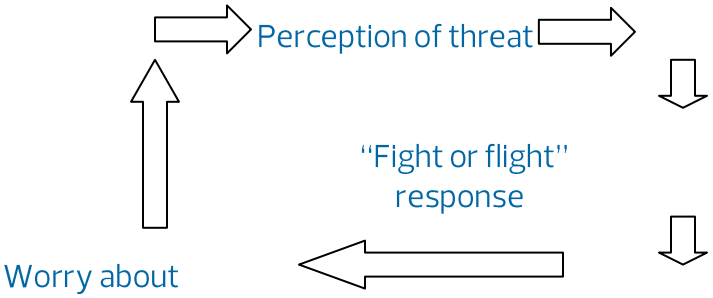
- *Trembling or shaking*
- *Restlessness*
- *Muscle tension*
- *Sweating*
- *Shortness of breath*
- *Pounding or racing heart*
- *Cold and clammy hands*
- *Fast breathing*
- *Dry mouth*
- *Hot flushes or chills*
- *Feeling sick or nauseated*
- *"Butterflies" in the stomach*

This fight or flight response is useful in the short term, especially if the danger can be dealt with by physical exertion. But it is of no use in the long term and certainly of little use in most stressful situations today – it does not help to run when the traffic cop pulls you over and it doesn't help to fight physically when you are threatened by your boss. However, because the fight or flight response was useful when, in the distant past we regularly had to deal with physical danger, it remains part of our physical make-up. It is no wonder that when we are threatened, we can't get enough air, our hearts pound, we feel nauseated, and our arms and legs tremble and shake, as all these responses would be useful if we could flee or fight.

The Anxiety Cycle

All of these changes in the body can be quickly reversed once vigorous physical activity has been carried out. This explains why many people report the desire to run or in some other way expend physical energy when placed in stressful situations. However, we are not often able to immediately engage in physical activity and therefore are less able to reverse the changes. For people who are prone to worry excessively, these changes can be quite disturbing and a new source of threat. This, of course, leads to further activation of the "fight or flight" response and the whole cycle is continued.

Anxiety triggers:
Fear-provoking thoughts
Feelings, images, or situations



Anxiety and Performance

Anxiety can become a problem if it occurs in situations where there is no real danger. The only part of the fight or flight response that is of use today when handling most stresses is the increase in mental alertness that it provides. It is very important to understand that while increased awareness can be helpful, anxiety in some situations can be unnecessary or inappropriate.

Anxiety helps you to perform any skilled activity. If you are totally relaxed when you take an exam, play a sport, or discuss a problem with your colleagues, you will not give your best. To do anything really well you need to be alert and anxious. Anxiety in moderation is a drive that can work well to make you more efficient.

Extreme anxiety interferes with the ability to think clearly and act sensibly. This, as everyone knows, is the sort of anxiety that robs us of our capacity to do things as well as we are able. In fact, the more difficult the task, the more important it is to manage anxiety carefully; ideally, one should be mildly anxious, alert, tense, and in control for maximum efficiency.

Chronic Anxiety

If individuals find it difficult to break the anxiety cycle, the problems can become chronic. Some of the results of feeling anxious over a long time include:

- Feeling restless or keyed up or on edge
- Being easily tired
- Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Restless unsatisfying sleep
- Feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope
- Feeling depressed or demoralised

When you experience these problems, the anxiety has begun to interfere with your everyday life. Because anxiety is a normal, *in-built*, and at times useful response, you will never banish it completely from your life, but the good news is that you can learn to manage and control it.

Why do the Symptoms of Tension and Anxiety Begin?

The reason why you have become anxious is probably due to a combination of causes:

The Effect of Personality

Personality refers to the usual way we react, feel and behave year in and year out. Most people who seek treatment for an anxiety disorder have come to regard themselves as nervous, not just because of their high levels of anxiety, but because they consider themselves to be people who are usually sensitive, emotional and worry easily. There are advantages to being like this, for the sensitivity means you can understand other people quickly and hence are often liked in return. It also means you probably like doing things properly and treat other people well. But the emotionality and the proneness to worry are the seeds from which anxiety can grow.

The Effect of Life Events and Stressors

Anxiety may begin at a time when you are experiencing a high level of stress. Throughout our lives, we are constantly adjusting to demands placed upon us by changing circumstances. Making an important decision, meeting a deadline, changing jobs or routines, dealing with others in our lives all require constant adjustments. However, at times you may experience a single major problem, or several smaller problems, that may exceed your normal powers of adaptation. When high levels of stress occur, anxiety can result if they produce in you a sense of threat and lack of control.

The Effect of your View of the World

Individuals with chronic anxiety have an increased tendency – compared to individuals without chronic anxiety – to automatically interpret information in their lives as threatening. For example, the ringing telephone is less likely to be considered with pleased anticipation of a friend ringing for a chat, but more likely to be viewed with alarm as news of an accident. This view of the world is thought to be developed from previous life experiences, which might include the impact of stressful life events, or the messages received from parents and other important people in your life.

Generalised Anxiety and Worry

Generalise anxiety is characterised by persistent feelings worry. The worry is typically out of proportion to the actual circumstances, it exists through most areas of a person's day-to-day life, and is experienced as difficult to control. The anxiety and worry is described as generalised, as the content of the worry can cover a number of different events or circumstances, and the physical symptoms of anxiety are not specific and are part of a normal response to threat.

Individuals with generalised anxiety describe themselves as sensitive by nature and their tendency to worry has usually existed since childhood or early adolescence.

The symptoms of anxiety typically experienced by individuals with generalised anxiety are:

- Feeling restless, keyed up, or on edge
- Being easily tired
- Having difficulty concentrating, or having your mind going blank
- Feeling irritable
- Having tense, tight or sore muscles
- Having difficulty sleeping; either difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless unsatisfying sleep

Everybody worries or gets anxious at some time in their lives. The worry in generalised anxiety is identical in nature to that experienced by anybody else, but it tends to be out of proportion, pervasive, and difficult to control, unlike the worry most people experience. Hence it significantly interferes with an individual's everyday functioning. The constant anxiety-provoking thinking and the accompanying physical symptoms of anxiety can be disabling, particularly if experienced over a long period of time.

From time to time, people may become unusually stressed, because of a physical illness or a life event such as divorce, bereavement or loss (or threat of loss) of employment. During these times, people may worry and become significantly more anxious, but after the stress resolves, the person can usually return to their usual functioning. This is usually just a temporary period of difficulty adjusting to stress and quite normal.

Worry about Worry

A second level of worry has been identified in individuals with generalised anxiety and includes thoughts such as:

- "I can't control my worry."
- "Worry is bad for me."
- "My worry will never end."
- "I will go mad with worry."

These worries may increase the sense of threat and therefore symptoms of anxiety can rise even further.

Sometimes people might believe that their worry is useful. They might think:

- "If I worry about the worst possible outcome I can be better prepared for the worst possible outcome"
- "Worrying about an outcome will stop it from happening"
- "If I stop worrying and something bad happens, I'd be responsible"
- "I can sort it out if I keep worrying about it"
- "I'd have nothing to think about if I didn't worry"
- "My worry helps me to keep control of my anxiety"

These beliefs are rarely confirmed, are rarely put to the test, and the individual continues to worry. If you hold any of these beliefs, it will be important to challenge them in order to be able to let go of the process of worry and its negative consequences.

Behaviours that can Maintain Anxiety and Worry

A number of things you do to deal with anxiety and worry in the short-term may actually cause it to continue in the longer term.

- *Reassurance seeking*, or needing to check with others that things are going to be okay. For example, telephoning your partner frequently to make sure nothing bad has happened to them, or visiting your doctor any time you notice a sign or bodily sensation that might mean you are ill. Continually seeking reassurance from others might relieve the anxiety in the short term, but the relief is usually only temporary. Because you are never really allowed to deal with the initial worry yourself, you can come to depend on this reassurance, and unfortunately come to need it more and more to relieve anxiety.

- Other forms of *checking* include obsessively reviewing the report for work or study to make sure that it is perfect, or not being able to take a break until all the tasks for the day are complete. While there is not a lot of evidence that this type of checking ensures that work is perfect, or that everything gets done, the individual never learns that their work can be acceptable without the checking or that they can take breaks and still get things done. Instead, goals are set too high, and the individual becomes upset, anxious and demoralised when he or she doesn't achieve what has been planned.

- *Avoidance* of situations or events that are thought to produce anxiety. For example, avoiding listening to the news because stories of disasters or illness will trigger worry about personal disaster or illness. Or avoiding people

because of what they might say to you. Or avoiding any situation in which the chances of danger have been overestimated. Avoidance can seriously limit your life and the possibility of enjoying a range of activities that are so much a part of everybody's life. When avoidance is based on an overestimation of danger, it is unnecessary and the belief of danger is never disconfirmed.

- *Procrastination*, a special form of avoidance which involves not beginning a task because of the anxiety associated with a possible negative consequence. Many times, tasks are started only when the negative consequences of not starting outweigh the negative consequences associated with completing the task – some tasks never get started at all. In most cases, the feared consequences are overly negative, usually catastrophic, and not based on reality.

- Another form of avoidance is trying to *suppress or control worry*. Unfortunately, the worry might well be made stronger by attempts to suppress it, possibly because you are purposefully focusing your attention on it. Some research has suggested that the process of deliberately suppressing thoughts can cause them to intrude into your mind more forcefully when the thoughts are no longer being actively being suppressed. This process has been called a rebound effect.