



Anxiety

Anxiety – including generalised anxiety or specific presentations such as phobias or panic attacks.

Below is a very simplified and general explanation of anxiety symptomatology. You may experience some or all of these things or your experience may be different. You are welcome to contact us to discuss whether what you are experiencing is anxiety or an anxiety disorder and what we can do to help.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the body's natural response to threat or danger. Both animals and people have 'fight or flight' responses whereby our bodies will set us up to fight or run away from imminent dangers. This is obvious if we think of an example of animals in the wild. If a zebra sees a lion watching or perhaps getting closer, the choice is to try to fight the lion or to try to run from the lion for basic survival. People are not usually being chased by lions, thankfully, so for us it's other dangers.

Imagine you place your hand on something hot, your body will make you take it away quickly, possibly even before you are conscious of it; or if you step out in front of a car, your natural reaction is to jump back out of the way. Stress is another danger for us and can cause the body to start its natural 'fight or flight reaction'. Stress releases hormones that are neurotoxic, which means they are not good for our brains, so our bodies recognise this as a danger and start our natural responses.

A little bit of anxiety and stress can be a good thing for us. For example, people often feel stressed going into an exam or job interview. This is understandable given the circumstances and can actually act to make the person feel "sharper" or more focused for what they are about to face.

So, when is anxiety a problem?

Anxiety is a problem if:

- It is happening to you more often than you think it is happening to other people in similar circumstances to you
- Anxiety happens to a greater extent to you than to someone else in your situation so when you are anxious, you are more anxious than others would be
- and/or it is stopping you from doing the things you want to be doing.

Symptoms of anxiety

Physical symptoms – As mentioned, the body's natural 'fight or flight reaction' can be triggered when we are anxious. Everyone will feel this in a slightly different way so you may have some or all of the symptoms listed below:


- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Feeling faint
- Feeling very hot or very cold
- Sweating
- Tingling in hands and/or feet
- Feeling like you might be sick
- Feeling like you need to go to the toilet
- Feeling your heart beating fast
- Palpitations
- Shortness of breath
- Breathing fast
- Shallow breathing
- Shaking

Cognitive symptoms – When we are anxious, we tend to worry about things. The worries may be about specific things we are facing either immediately in front of us or in our lives in general. They may be about things that have happened in the past or may happen in the future. We may worry about the symptoms we get when we are anxious, for example if we experience the physical symptoms listed above we can worry about our health perhaps thinking we are having a heart attack or asthma attack. People can start to worry about what all these worries mean or say about us as people. We may worry about why we have so many worries, so we are then worried about worry.

Behavioural symptoms – As mentioned earlier, our bodies don't like anxiety and stress so quite often we will try to avoid the things that make us anxious. This might be fairly easy to do if our anxiety is about something specific such as a fear of flying or a fear of dogs. If we can't avoid the things that make us anxious, however, we tend to engage in safety behaviours such as checking on things or carrying something around with us to make us feel safer. These are only a few examples and people can engage in lots of different and sometimes quite extreme behaviours to manage anxiety.

Types of anxiety

There are a number of anxiety disorders and these are generally split up by what triggered or caused the anxiety initially; the content of what makes the person anxious; and what people do about their anxiety.



Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – This is where there has been initial trauma or something has happened to a person and afterwards they have difficulties. Symptoms can include flashbacks or nightmares about parts of the trauma alongside symptoms of anxiety described above.

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) – This is where people worry about lots of things rather than any one thing in particular and they have symptoms of anxiety described above.

Social Anxiety Disorder – This is where people feel symptoms of anxiety in social situations. We appreciate that meeting a Psychologist can be particularly difficult for people with Social Anxiety Disorder. Most people feel anxious about meeting us for the first time and your Psychologist understand and will support you with this. If coming to our clinics is difficult, try our online sessions.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder – This is where people feel worried and anxious about things to a greater extent than other people tend to (obsessions) and engage in repetitive behaviours that they feel they must complete to manage their anxiety (compulsions).

Panic Disorder – This is where people feel the physical symptoms of anxiety mentioned above to a greater extent than others and experience panic attacks.

Health Anxiety – This is where people have significant worries about physical health while not necessarily having a physical health difficulty.

Phobias – This is where people are extremely anxious about something in particular. For example, some people are very fearful of flying or going to the dentist; others don't like to be around particular animals or objects; some people feel anxious about heights, enclosed spaces or being in the dark. These are only a few examples and there are lots more.

Agoraphobia – This is a fear of going outside. As we mentioned, there are lots of phobias but we have picked this one out particularly because it is always difficult for people with agoraphobia to attend clinic appointments. Our online sessions can be a great way to start here as you don't need to leave home to speak to one of our Psychologists.

