

Anxiety 101

"We experience moments absolutely free from worry. These brief respites are called panic."

~Cullen Hightower

This part of the group is meant to explore important information about the anxiety itself. The first step to managing anxiety is understanding it as well as we can— to “know thine enemy,” so to speak.

On the pages entitled **“Anxiety is...”** and **“Why does my body do this?”** we’ll talk about:



- What the anxiety “alarm” really is: the “fight or flight” response— and what its common symptoms are
- The difference between normal anxiety and “phobic” anxiety
- What causes anxiety
- Why our bodies do what they do when we are anxious
- Why we can’t just “get rid of” the anxiety

In the section **“Anxiety Triggers,”** we’ll go over the different things that can trigger anxiety and how the brain comes to believe these triggers are dangerous.



In our final section, **“Anxiety Fuel,”** we learn about common ways that anxiety can get worse, and how our own thoughts and behaviors play a role in this process.



Anxiety Is...

Anxiety is a part of our bodies' natural **alarm** system, the “**fight or flight**” response, which exists to protect us from danger. These natural body responses are not harmful— but they are really uncomfortable!

The most pure form of the “fight or flight” response is a **panic attack**, which involves a rush of anxiety symptoms, many of which are listed below, usually peaking in about 10 minutes. In these cases, the body is trying to tell us “something dangerous is happening *right now!*” Other forms of anxiety that are less acute but often just as debilitating, such as **chronic worry**, involve symptoms similar to the “fight or flight” symptoms of panic attacks. However, in these cases, it is as if the body is saying “something dangerous is *going to happen* sometime in the future... so watch out!” The differences between the two are the intensity of the response and the context in which it is triggered. In this manual we will refer to all anxiety symptoms as being related to the “fight or flight” response. The most common anxiety symptoms are listed below. **Try circling the ones that apply to you.**

Physical Symptoms

- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweating
- Trouble breathing
- Tightness in the chest, chest pain
- Dizziness
- Feeling: “Things aren’t real”
- Feeling: “I don’t feel like myself.”
- Tingling and numbness in fingers, toes, and other extremities
- Nausea, vomiting
- Muscle tension
- Low energy, exhaustion
- Changes in body temperature
- Shaking, jitters
- Urgency to urinate or defecate
- Changes in vision and other senses

Cognitive (thinking) Symptoms

- Worries
- Negative thoughts about one’s ability to tolerate emotions or future stress
- Negative predictions about future events
- Other common thoughts:
 - “I am going crazy!”
 - “I am going to have a heart attack!”
 - “I am going to faint.”
- Trouble concentrating or keeping attention
- Magical ideas, phrases or images such as “If I do not wash my hands I will die or someone will be harmed.”
- Preoccupation with body sensations or functions

Behavioral Symptoms

- Avoidance** of anything that provokes anxiety, including people, places, situations, objects, animals, thoughts, memories, body feelings, etc.
- Protective, “safety” behaviors
- Aggression, verbal abuse, lashing out
- Alcohol and/or drug use
- Compulsive behaviors, such as excessive checking or other unreasonable or harmful rituals or routines



What causes anxiety?

We know from scientific research that anxiety is caused by a combination of factors related to both “**nature**” (**genetics**) and “**nurture**” (**experience**). Check out page 82 for a more detailed explanation of the factors that can lead to anxiety.

When “fight or flight” goes too far: “Phobic” anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety from time-to-time. We often get the question: “How do I know if I have an anxiety disorder?” An anxiety disorder is diagnosed when someone experiences anxiety symptoms and these symptoms:

- Interfere with a person’s life aims
- Happen too often or with too much intensity, given the actual danger of a situation
- Are not explained by other factors, such as a medical problem or substance abuse

Some people experience significant anxiety and choose simply to live with it. It is up to you to decide if you can handle the anxiety on your own, or if treatment is necessary.

Take home point:

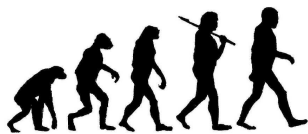
The symptoms of anxiety are the “fight or flight” response, and are normal, functional, and necessary for survival. They become a problem when they are too severe or happen too often, given the real amount of danger present, or if it interferes with the activities of life.

Remember: Anxiety is uncomfortable, not dangerous!

Why can’t I just get rid of my anxiety?

Anxiety is as vital to our survival as hunger and thirst. Without our “fight or flight” response we would not be as aware of possible threats to our safety. We also might not take care of ourselves or prepare adequately for the future. And we probably wouldn’t enjoy a scary movie or a roller coaster!

Anxiety is necessary to protect us and can even be fun at times. It isn’t in our best interests to get rid of it completely!



Why does my body do this?

There is a reason!

We have evolved over millions of years to better protect ourselves. Our brains have learned to *automatically* signal danger when it is present or we perceive that we may be harmed in some way. Each symptom of anxiety has a specific evolutionary purpose, to help us “fight” or “flee.”

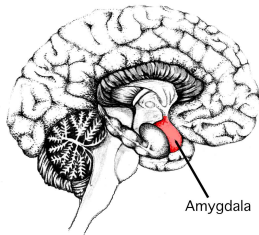
Try to figure out how each symptom of anxiety is used by our bodies to protect us when we are in danger, by matching the evolutionary purpose with the anxiety symptoms. Some in the right-hand column may be used twice, and there may be multiple answers for some symptoms. Once you are done, you can see if you were right—the answers are at the bottom of the page. Also, a more detailed diagram of the biology of the “fight or flight” response is in **Appendix I, “The Biology of Fight or Flight.”**

Anxiety Symptom	Purpose
1. Rapid heartbeat _____	A. Muscles contract and tighten to help us fight or flee
2. Sweating _____	B. Push blood around the body faster to supply cells with oxygen in case we need to use energy to flee or protect ourselves
3. Flushing in face _____	C. Lots of energy is spent for body to protect us
4. Tightness in the chest, chest pain _____	D. Body increases speed and depth of breathing
5. Feeling: “Things aren’t real” _____	E. Thoughts tend to be negative and protective; it is dangerous to have “good” thoughts if we are in danger!
6. Feeling: “I’m not myself” _____	F. Must stay alive, even if it means using force
7. Tingling or numbness in fingers and toes _____	G. Try to think of ways to protect ourselves in case bad things happen in future
8. Nausea, vomiting _____	H. Brain is constantly scanning for danger, from one thing to next
9. Muscle tension, stiffness _____	I. Body stops digestion and attempts to rid itself of excessive harmful substances
10. Low energy, exhaustion _____	J. If something is dangerous, remember it and get away from it!
11. Changes in body temperature _____	K. Cools us off when we are running or fighting and makes it harder for a predator to grab us
12. Shaking, jitteriness _____	L. Blood is redirected away from head, skin, fingers, and toes; if we are cut, we will not bleed to death as easily
13. Urgency to urinate or defecate _____	M. Decrease in salivation
14. Hyperventilation or trouble breathing _____	
15. Dizziness, lightheadedness _____	
16. Worries _____	
17. Negative predictions about future events _____	
18. Trouble concentrating or keeping attention _____	
19. Avoiding _____	
20. Fight or be aggressive _____	
21. Changes in vision, hearing, smell, taste _____	
22. Dry mouth _____	

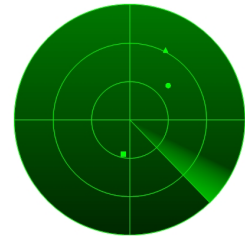


Did you know... when our body’s “fight or flight” alarm is triggered, a domino effect of chemical changes and messages are sent to various parts of the brain and body, producing these symptoms. This process is programmed to last only about 10 minutes, *unless it is triggered again*.

Anxiety “Triggers”

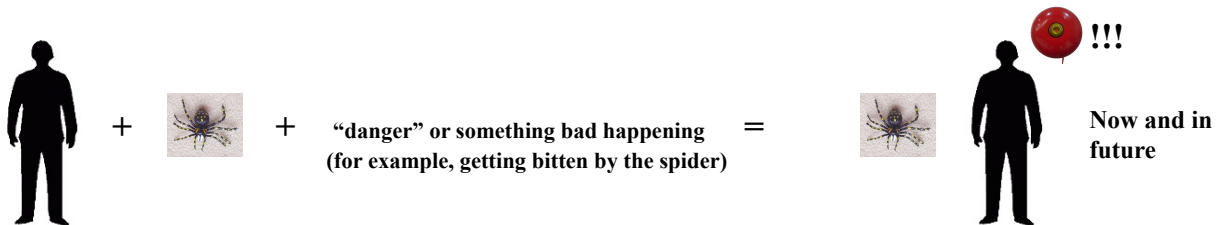


Our brains are designed to keep us safe. The anxiety part of the brain, the **amygdala**, is like a radar that is trained to spot dangerous objects and situations. When this “radar” spots something that could be dangerous, it tells the brain to begin the “fight or flight” response, producing the uncomfortable feelings we get when we are anxious.



“One thing leads to another:” how a trigger becomes connected with our “fight or flight” response

When we perceive danger, whatever it is that could be dangerous (in this case, a spider) is remembered by the **amygdala**. The next time something reminds us of the spider, or we actually come into contact with one, our anxiety “alarm” goes off.



Types of anxiety triggers and the Anxiety Disorder “Diagnosis”

Nearly anything can be trained to trigger the “fight or flight” response. Psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and clinical psychiatric social workers have tried to find ways to tell the difference between different types of anxiety triggers. Anxiety disorder **diagnoses** come out of this attempt. While a diagnosis is not a perfect way of describing a person’s experiences, it can help us to know what types of treatments may be effective. Different groups of triggers and the diagnoses most frequently associated with them are listed below. Some of these categories overlap, and it is possible for one person to have more than one diagnosis.

Trigger

Diagnosis

Worries, predictions, and negative thoughts about the future	→	Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
Social situations and people, such as social events and performances, along with fear of criticism from others	→	Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia)
Fear of having a panic attack and fear of body feelings that remind one of panic attacks	→	Panic Disorder
Places a panic attack has happened before or could happen	→	Agoraphobia
Places, situations, animals, objects, blood or injury, etc.	→	Specific Phobias
Disturbing intrusive thoughts, contamination, doubt and urge to check things, etc.	→	Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
Memories and things associated with a traumatic event	→	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



Scary event??

“Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”



Anxiety??

Some people wonder if scary *events* caused their anxiety, or if their *anxiety itself* is what causes them to more readily see things as scary.

We know from scientific research on anxiety that *both* are true. Events and stress in our lives can create more anxiety. For example, a passenger on a flight that barely escapes an serious accident may feel anxiety the next time they take a flight, especially if this was one of their first flying experiences. Flying may then become a new anxiety trigger. Conversely, someone that is already vulnerable to having anxiety (see page 82 for more on this) may experience normal turbulence on a flight as scary and then feel afraid to fly in the future.



What if I don’t know what triggers my anxiety?

For the sake of treatment, it is important to learn to identify what it is that makes you anxious. For some people it is very clear; for others, anxiety seems to come from “out of nowhere.”

To identify what makes you anxious, ask yourself the following questions:

“When I feel scared or nervous, what is going on around me or what am I thinking about?”

“Am I worried about having more anxiety in the future?”

“Am I afraid of body sensations that remind me of intense anxiety attacks?”

“Do I ever try to do more than I can handle or create unrealistic expectations for myself or others?”

“Am I worried that I will not be able to cope if bad things happen in the future?”

Anxiety “Triggers” take home points:

The brain can learn to be afraid of almost anything, and some anxiety “triggers” are more common than others. These triggers help define anxiety disorder diagnoses, which we use to better understand the anxiety and develop treatments.

Anxiety can be caused by scary events, and anxiety can also make one more likely to experience an event as scary.

It is important to understand your anxiety “triggers.” In most cases it is possible to figure them out yourself. Sometimes it is necessary to have the help of a mental health professional to do so.

Exercise

My anxiety triggers are:

List here the objects, situations, events, or places that tend to trigger your anxiety. Use the questions above if you are having trouble figuring out what makes you anxious.

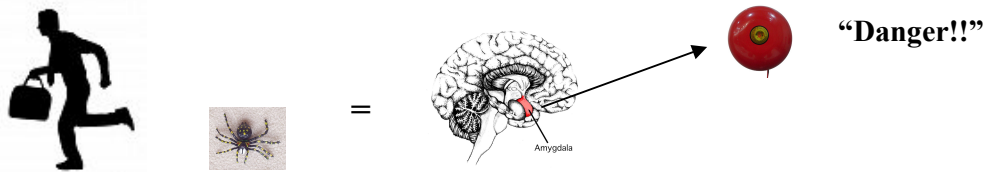
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Anxiety “Fuel”



When we feel anxious, we typically want to do something to make ourselves feel better. Most of these behaviors feel natural because our bodies also want to keep us safe. However, some of these behaviors can make things worse; we add “fuel” to the anxiety “fire.” We can add fuel gradually over time or dump lots on all at once. In all cases the anxiety “fire” gets bigger.

What behaviors are in danger of causing the anxiety to get worse? Anything that teaches the **amygdala** (the anxiety center of the brain) that something is dangerous. Remember our spider example? Let’s say that every time this man sees a spider he tries to avoid it by getting away. What does this teach him? That the spider is dangerous, of course!

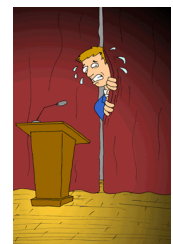
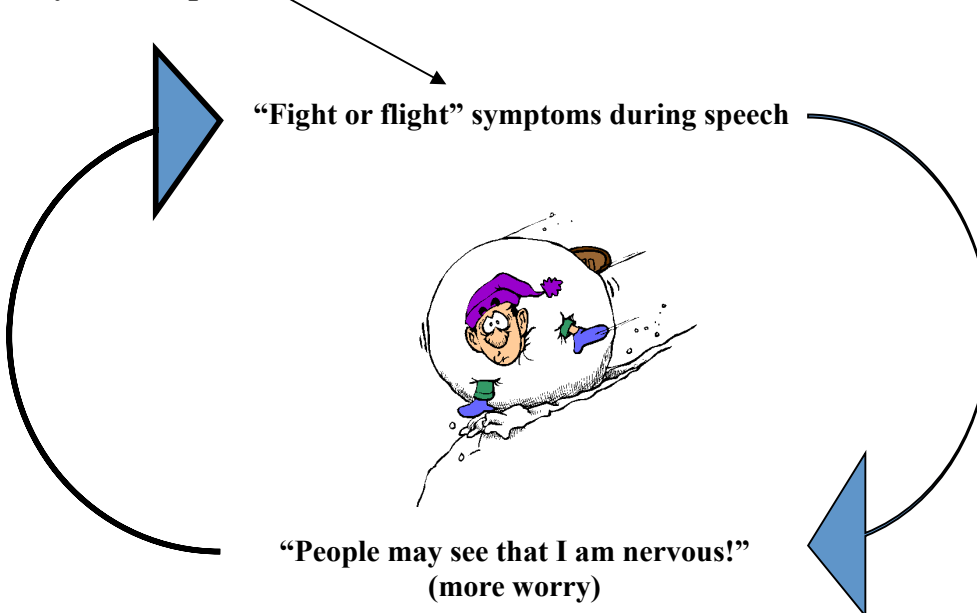


Each time he avoids the spider, his **amygdala** gets more feedback that the spider is dangerous. Next time he sees the spider, his anxiety “alarm” will be louder, or it may go off more quickly than before. The process by which the brain learns that something is more dangerous over time is called **sensitization**. It is also called **reinforcement** of the anxiety because the anxiety response gets stronger and stronger. Reinforcement can happen both in the short term (when the danger seems to be present) or in the long term, as we discuss below.

Short-term reinforcement: the anxiety “snowball effect”

Have you ever worried about speaking in front of a group of people? Worries about performing well can lead to jitteriness, cracking voice, difficulty concentrating, and other “fight or flight” symptoms. Often the physical anxiety symptoms will then create *more* worry about the performance; this creates a “snowball effect,” in which anxiety gets worse and worse, even to the point of panic.

Worry about speech

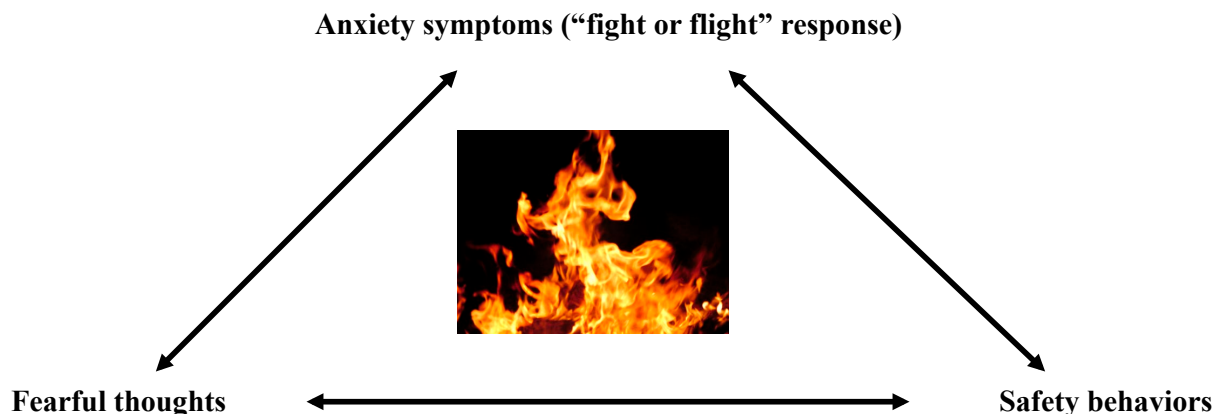


Long-term reinforcement: “Safety Behaviors” and negative thoughts/beliefs

As mentioned earlier, anxiety “fuel” is anything that teaches the anxiety center of the brain, the **amygdala**, that something is dangerous. Over the long term, the most common ways to do this involve negative thoughts and beliefs as well as protective actions called **safety behaviors**. While these behaviors seem to help the anxiety right now, they usually make it worse in the long run. Examples are listed below.

Behaviors	Thoughts
<p><i>Safety behaviors are often justified using “as long as” statements:</i></p> <p>Avoidance: “As long as I avoid that, I will be safe.”</p> <p>Attacking others, acting on anger, etc.: “As long as I use verbal or physical force to protect myself, I will have control.”</p> <p>Protective behaviors: “As long as I have my water bottle with me, I am safe and will not have another panic attack.”</p> <p>Rituals (usually part of OCD, characterized by excessive, repetitive checking, washing, counting, asking for reassurance, etc.): “As long as I knock four times when I have a scary thought, nothing bad will happen to my daughter.”</p> <p>Substance use (trying to “numb” the anxiety): “As long as I can have some alcohol, I will feel better.”</p>	<p>Negative thoughts about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the future -yourself -other people -the world <p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p>“I am going to lose my job and end up homeless.”</p> <p>“I must have control...”</p> <p>“That person thinks I am an idiot.”</p> <p>“If I drive on the highway I will get into an accident.”</p> <p>“If I keep having this thought it must be true.”</p>

Whether in the short run or over time, anxiety feelings, fearful thoughts, and protective, “safety” behaviors work together to keep our anxiety “fire” burning. Each feeds off the others, and any one of these can act as the “match” to get the fire started. **In CBT, our goal is to work on these thoughts and behaviors to help extinguish the fire as much as possible.**



Anxiety “Fuel” take home points:

Some of our thoughts and behaviors, while they seem to help us, actually make anxiety worse. Safety behaviors, such as avoidance and protective behaviors, as well as negative thoughts, serve to reinforce anxiety in both the short- and long-term.

It is important to understand what, if any, safety behaviors we are using, so that we can work to reverse this through treatment.

Exercise
Anxiety “Fuel”

Below, list some of the ways you may accidentally make your anxiety worse, based on the material discussed above.

Avoidance

Do I avoid anything because it seems scary or makes me feel anxious? This may include avoiding thinking about something or avoiding certain types of situations or people.

Things I avoid:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Anger and Irritability

Do I become angry or irritable and attack others verbally or physically?

Times I become angry:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What I do when I am angry:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Protective “Safety” Behaviors

Do I try to protect myself in certain situations in order to feel more safe?

How I try to protect myself:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Substance Use

Do I ever use drugs or alcohol in order to “numb” the anxiety?

Types of drugs or alcohol:**When I tend to drink or use drugs:****Thoughts**

Do I have thoughts that come up continually and make me feel anxious?

Thoughts that make me feel anxious:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Anxiety 101

Summary

Anxiety Is...

We learned that the symptoms of anxiety are the “fight or flight” response, and are normal, functional, and necessary for survival. They become a problem when they are too severe or happen too much given the real amount of danger present, or if it interferes with the activities of life. While having chronic anxiety over long periods of time puts stress on the body, it can be helpful to remember that **anxiety itself is not dangerous**; but it sure can be uncomfortable.

Why does my body do this?

In this section we covered the ways that **each “fight or flight” symptom functions to protect us in case we are in real danger.**

We also learned that when our body’s “fight or flight” alarm is triggered, a domino effect of chemical changes and messages are sent to various parts of the brain and body, producing these symptoms. **This process is programmed to last only about 10 minutes, unless it is triggered again.**

Anxiety Triggers

Here we learned that the brain can learn to be afraid of almost anything, and some anxiety “triggers” are more common than others. Anxiety disorder diagnoses are organized based on what triggers the anxiety.

We know that anxiety can be caused by scary events, and anxiety can also make one more likely to experience an event as scary.

It is important to identify your anxiety “triggers.” In most cases it is possible to figure them out yourself. Sometimes it is necessary to have the help of a mental health professional to do this. A few tips are on page 10.

Anxiety Fuel

Some of our thoughts and behaviors, while they seem to help us, actually make anxiety worse. **Safety behaviors**, such as avoidance and protective behaviors, as well as negative thoughts, serve to reinforce anxiety in both the short- and long-term.

It is important to understand how we make our anxiety worse, so that we can work to reverse this through treatment.



A common question: What if it really is dangerous?

Of course, we are not trying to ignore anxiety or feel calm if something really is dangerous. One of our **goals in CBT is to learn what *is* dangerous and what *is not*, what we can control and what we can’t, and how to balance taking risks with keeping ourselves safe.**

If you are here, it is likely that the cost of trying to keep yourself safe is outweighing the advantages. We’ll be exploring this more in some of our other modules.



Notes

Notes