

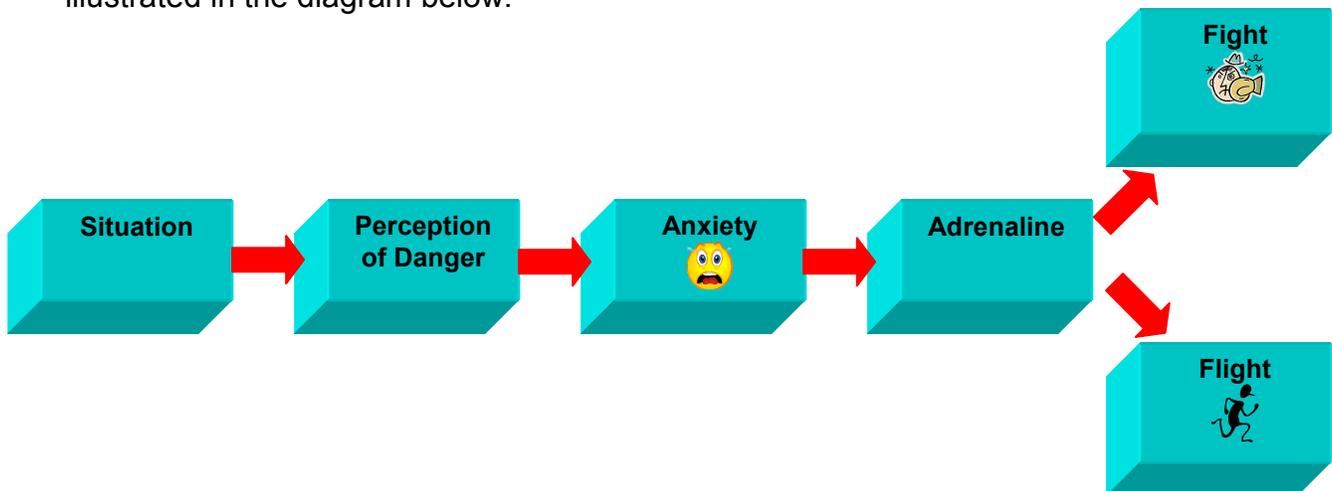


HOW TO OVERCOME ANXIETY

ANXIETY AND THE 'FIGHT OR FLIGHT' RESPONSE

What does anxiety mean? If you used words like it means feeling tense, nervous, anxious, afraid, scared, or terrified, you in fact used synonyms for anxiety. These words basically describe how intense the level of anxiety we are experiencing is. Anxiety means that you we perceive a threat or danger. For example, if I see a bear in the forest, I will become anxious or afraid/scared or even panicked because I perceive a danger of physical harm. If I am anxious about presenting at work, I am become afraid/scared/panicked because I perceive an emotional threat, that of making a mistake and being judged and rejected and making a fool of myself. Now may be a good time to review the toolkit on Why Do We Have Emotions. If you haven't read this toolkit, now is a good time to do so.

Once we perceive a danger, what we call the 'flight or flight' response is activated by the release of adrenal in your system via the sympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system. 'Flight' means that we try to escape the danger we are facing, while 'fight' means we have no choice but to face the threat. To continue with the example of encountering a bear in the forest, our first choice would be to run away and escape the danger of the bear, which is 'flight'. However, if we had no choice, for example we unexpectedly came face to face with the bear, escape might not be possible so unfortunately 'fight' would be the only option left. The 'flight or flight' response is illustrated in the diagram below.



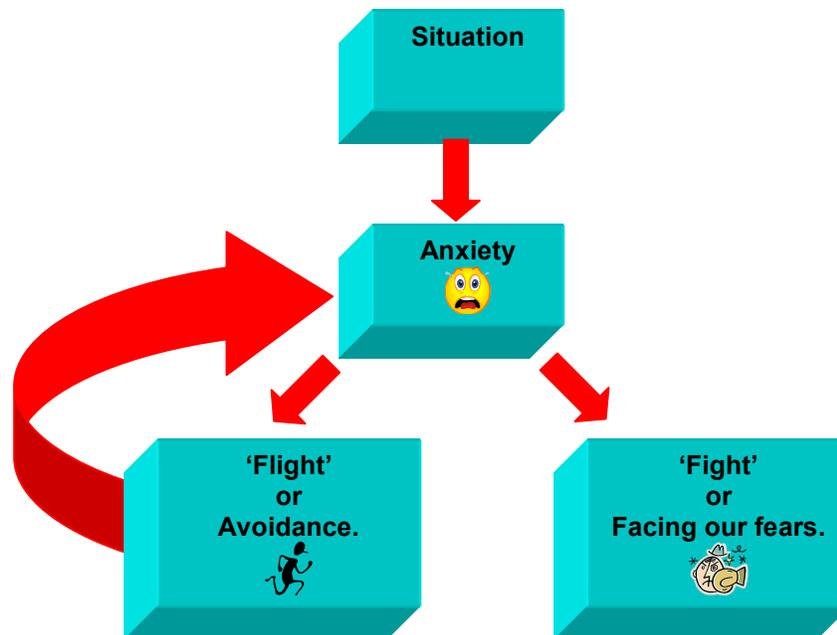
Anxiety is an unpleasant feeling. It can become so unpleasant that some people commonly think they will go crazy, lose control, faint, have a heart attack or become insane. Rest assured that these are myths and that none of these outcomes are possible. In fact, the physical sensations you feel when you are anxious are normal. They are not dangerous! Thus, anxiety is unpleasant but not dangerous. The table below illustrates the physiological changes that occur in our bodies when the ‘flight or flight’ response is activated and their associated purpose, followed by the symptoms of anxiety that we experience.

Physiological Change	Purpose	Anxiety Symptom
Increased heart rate and strength of heart beat	Faster delivery of oxygen and removal of carbon dioxide	Racing or pounding heart
Redirection of blood flow away from skin, toes, and fingers and toward big muscles.	Increased energy in the big muscles for fight or flight; less blood loss if injured	Pale skin and coldness, especially in the hands and feet
More oxygen to muscles as energy for fight or flight	Increased rate and depth of breathing	Fast breathing (also dizziness, lightheadedness, shortness of breath, feeling of hot or cold, sweating, chest discomfort, visual changes, if the increased oxygen is not metabolized)
Increased sweating	Cooling of the body to prevent exhaustion from overheating; slippery skin to slip away from predator	Perspiration
Pupil dilatation	Increased visual field to scan for danger	Sensitivity to light
Suppression of digestive system	Redirection of all energy toward fight or flight	Dry mouth, nausea, stomach cramps, diarrhea
Increased muscle activation	Preparation for fight or flight	Muscle tension, muscle cramps, aches, trembling, shaking
Release of natural analgesics	Decreased sensitivity to pain to enable continued fight or flight even if injured	Less sensitivity to pain
Contraction of spleen	Release of more red blood cells to carry oxygen; more energy for fighting or fleeing	No noticeable symptoms
Release of stored sugar from liver	More energy for muscles for fighting or fleeing	No noticeable symptoms
Release of coagulants and lymphocytes	Sealing of wounds and repairing of damaged tissue	No noticeable symptoms

Barlow & Craske. *Mastery of your anxiety and panic*, Third Edition (MAP-3). 2000. Graywind Publications Incorporated.

When faced with anxiety in our everyday life, avoidance, which is simply ‘flight’, is usually the action that most of us take. For example, if we are scared of losing a friendship, we may choose not to be assertive. If we are afraid of conflict, we avoid it at

all costs. If presentations make us anxious, we try to avoid them as much as possible. The problem with avoidance is that it simply reinforces anxiety because: 1) the only way we can get rid of those unpleasant feelings is to avoid the anxiety provoking situation; 2) we develop the belief that we cannot cope with the anxiety and; 3) we may believe that what we fear will come true because we have no evidence contrary to the fact. Rather than avoiding, facing our fears, which is analogous to a 'fight', is the best way that psychologists have found to combat anxiety. This is demonstrated in the figure below.



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1. Make sure you are breathing calmly. When faced with anxiety, people tend to adopt one of two types of breathing patterns. Some people have the tendency to hyperventilate. Breathing in this manner can increase anxiety because the added oxygen in your blood can cause dizziness, lightheadedness and even feelings of depersonalization or derealization (review the above table quickly). Other people will have the inclination to tighten their chest muscles. Breathing in this manner can also increase anxiety because your diaphragm is unable to properly expand to let in a good amount of oxygen in your blood. When you have a lack of oxygen in your blood, a chemical is released telling your brain there is not enough oxygen in your blood, which leads to anxiety. In order to learn how to breathe calmly, psychologists show people 'diaphragmatic breathing'. Click the link to consult the toolkit on Diaphragmatic Breathing.

2. Get rid of your negative thinking. Identify and evaluate whether your fear is real. A useful acronym is **FEAR: False Evidence Appears Real**. If there appears to be some evidence for your fear, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the probability that my fear will come true?
- What is the worst thing that can happen?

- If the worst thing is not that bad or not likely to come true is it that important?

In order to help change your negative thinking that can lead to anxiety, consult the toolkit on How To Change Your Negative Thinking.

3. Don't avoid your fear. Fight it! As we discussed above, avoidance feeds anxiety and makes it worse because: 1) you believe your fear may be true and have no evidence to refute it; 2) you believe that you cannot cope with the anxiety so you avoid it and; 3) the only way to experience relief is to avoid.

Research studies have shown that the best way to combat anxiety is to use what psychologists call 'exposure therapy'. Expose yourself slowly to the situation. Break the situation down to manageable parts and go one step at a time. When in the situation, use the evidence against your fear and make sure to breath at a normal rhythm. If you get anxious, stop and calm yourself. Do not run away from the situation, as this is avoidance and will just reinforce the anxiety. Calm yourself first and then leave the situation. Consult the toolkit on Exposure Therapy in order to learn how to effectively do exposure therapy.



For your information: Our anxiety system is turned on like a light switch, whereas it is turned off more like a dimmer switch. This makes sense from a survival point of view. If you are faced with a danger or threat, it is imperative that the 'flight or flight' response be turned on right away. If not, we could lose precious time waiting for the response to get started and end up being seriously hurt. In contrast, it can take two to three minutes for the 'flight or flight' response to be turned off and for you to feel relief from the anxiety. This also makes sense. Since you have perceived a danger, you want to be ready in case a new danger appears or the similar one comes back. The enzyme that breaks down adrenaline and shuts off the 'flight or flight' response does so gradually.



A helpful example: Anxiety is sometimes triggered when there is no real danger. Changing your negative thinking will help you come to this realization. False alarms are a good example in which to illustrate this. For example, I'm sure you've heard a car alarm go off in the middle of the night for no apparent reason. Maybe there was a fault in the wiring or it was triggered accidentally. In this case, is the car being stolen? Would you call the police? Of course not! Although the sound of the alarm is real, there is no danger of the car being stolen. Similarly, sometimes our anxiety system gets triggered when there is no danger. So although the anxiety we experience is real (i.e. like the sound of the car alarm), there is no danger (i.e. just like the car is not being stolen).