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 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

**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!
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

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

**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.

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

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 “Triggers,” continued

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.
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**

“Fight or flight” symptoms during speech

“People may see that I am nervous!”

(more worry)
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviors</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Safety behaviors are often justified using “as long as” statements:</strong></td>
<td>Negative thoughts about:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoidance:</strong> “As long as I avoid that, I will be safe.”</td>
<td>-the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attacking others, acting on anger, etc.:</strong> “As long as I use verbal or physical force to protect myself, I will have control.”</td>
<td>-yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Protective behaviors:</strong> “As long as I have my water bottle with me, I am safe and will not have another panic attack.”</td>
<td>-other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rituals</strong> (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.”</td>
<td>-the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substance use</strong> (trying to “numb” the anxiety): “As long as I can have some alcohol, I will feel better.”</td>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I am going to lose my job and end up homeless.”</td>
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<td>“I must have control…”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“That person thinks I am an idiot.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“If I drive on the highway I will get into an accident.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“If I keep having this thought it must be true.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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 symptoms (“fight or flight” response)
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Anger and Irritability</th>
<th>Protective “Safety” Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Do I become angry or irritable and attack others verbally or physically?</td>
<td>Do I try to protect myself in certain situations in order to feel more safe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things I avoid:</td>
<td>Times I become angry:</td>
<td>How I try to protect myself:</td>
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<td>1.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>What I do when I am angry:</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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 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