

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY (& why it shouldn't be ignored!)

Anxiety is a pattern of thinking, feeling and physical sensations that have become memorised and in particular situations they are like being on auto pilot.

It can be triggered by a real threat or a perceived threat. If the threat is real then your body's response is appropriate and necessary to keep you from actual harm. The problem is when the anxiety response is triggered by a perceived threat that either isn't real or is overestimated.

An anxious response to a perceived (but not real or an overestimated) threat can be triggered by particular situations, by our own thoughts or by memories of previously frightening situations. Sometimes the words and actions of others in the same situation may trigger anxiety. These are called False Alarms.

The physiological symptoms are extremely unpleasant and can be frightening in themselves. People often find the symptoms embarrassing. The diagram below indicates what is going on when anxiety hits

The STRESS response - fight/flight

STEP 1 Perceive a threat or danger

STEP 2 Mobilisation of Energy: Release adrenalin

↑ heart rate; ↑ muscles tension ready to act; ↑ breathing; ↑ sweating; ↑ blood moves to muscles

= more **SPEED**

↓ digestion; ↓ immune system; ↓ blood in periphery; ↓ attention to other things
(dry mouth/nausea) (numb/tingling)

= less **ACCURACY**

STEP 3 Act if necessary

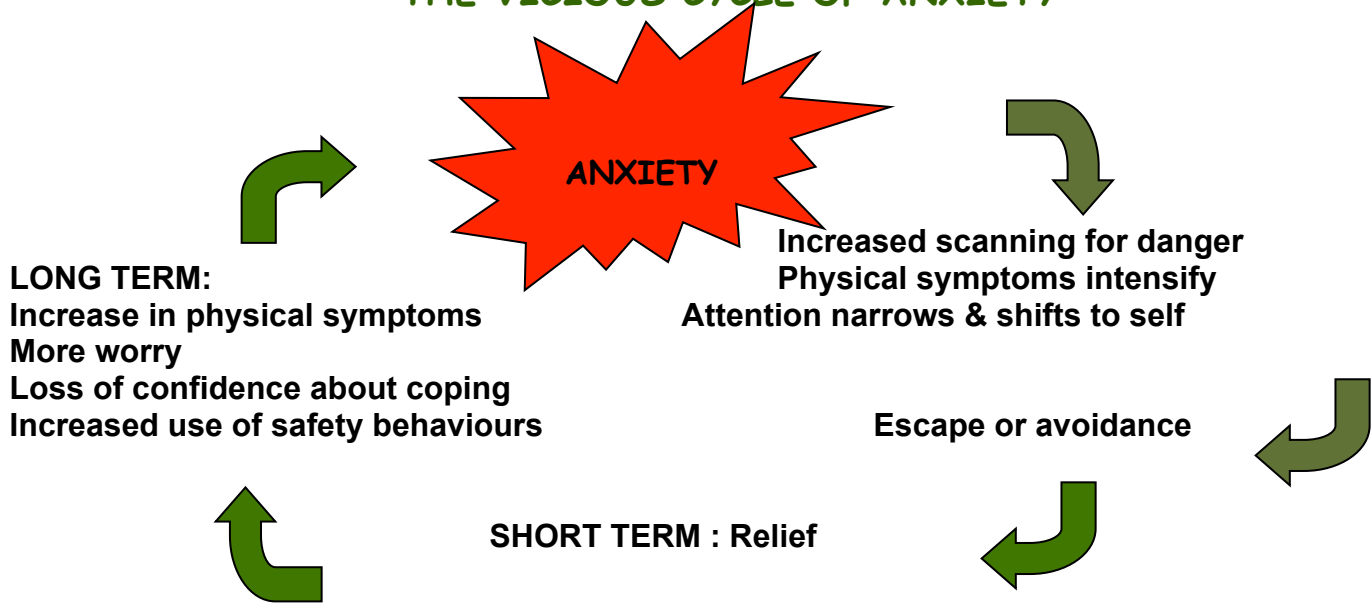
Some people experience all of the above and others just a few. What is important is to know what you experience and try to work out what is the first sign of an impending episode of anxiety. Then you can take steps to calm yourself through breathing techniques so that the full episode is either prevented or muted.

Left untreated, anxiety can cause people to feel hopeless, and to limit their exposure to feared situations so much that they become withdrawn and their lives become more closed to opportunities that are the source of happiness and good mental health such as socialising and exploring new challenges or experiences. This path often leads to depression, which is one of the reason why depression and anxiety often co-occur. Many of the strategies people use make anxiety far worse as shown in the diagram below:

FALSE ALARMS

- Fight or flight is triggered by expected threat or danger - no distinction between real, imagined, physical or social threats
- Panic attacks occur when the fight / flight response is triggered at the wrong time!!!

THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF ANXIETY



If anxiety is severe, its best to get professional help, but is worth doing a bit of analysis of what happens for you (anxiety is very much an individual experience). The questions below are a good starting point.

What are the situations that trigger anxiety for me?

What are the potential threats I worry about?

Physiological symptoms?

What Anxious thinking do I do?

What Anxious behaviours do I do?

What Safety behaviours am I using to escape or avoid? (these make anxiety much worse)

What am I missing out on?

This article does not constitute therapy or psychological advice.

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