



## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal evolutionary response that all humans have. It is caused by a part of the brain called the Amygdala which is responsible for detecting and alerting us to threats and dangers. Without this part of the brain, humans and many other species aren't able to protect themselves from dangers, and are more likely to become extinct.

When the Amygdala detects a danger, we experience the *Fight, Flight, or Freeze* response which we know today as Anxiety. This is great when we are faced with real dangers such as speeding cars, people acting aggressively, getting seriously ill, or being at a height. However, our brain has not evolved as quickly as the world around us and so it quite often alerts us to danger when there isn't a real danger, for example, meeting new people, talking in front of a class, getting on a bus, or going to school.

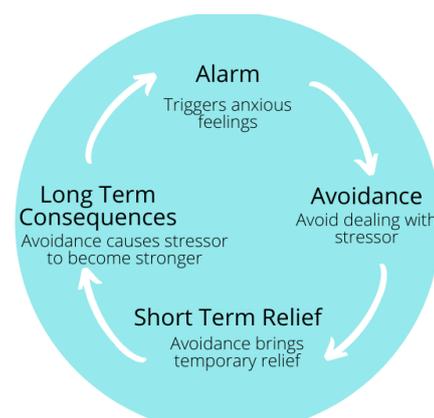


When we approach the perceived danger, we have anxious thoughts about what might happen, and these thoughts cause us to change our behaviour, emotions, and also causes physical symptoms. These thoughts, behaviours and physical symptoms are the body's way of preparing us to fight, run away, or hide from the perceived danger, and are typical symptoms of anxiety.

## What keeps anxiety going?

### Avoidance

Avoidance happens when our brain tells us to run away from the thing that is interpreted as a threat in order to protect ourselves. When we avoid things, we feel momentarily relieved from anxiety, however this increases our anxiety in the long term. By avoiding triggers for anxiety, we are not able to learn to cope in these situations, or challenge anxious thoughts, and therefore the anxiety does not get dealt with and feels worse the next time the trigger occurs. Exposing ourselves to the trigger of anxiety helps us to learn to manage and overcome the anxiety, while also improving confidence, resilience, and self-esteem.



### Safety Behaviours

Safety behaviours are things that we do to prevent an anxious response, and to make us feel safer in certain situations. Some common examples include wearing earphones, being quiet in social situations, or carrying safety objects. Similar to avoidance, when we have safety behaviours we are not able to fully experience the anxious situation and therefore do not have the opportunity to learn to cope and challenge anxious thoughts. We can also mistakenly attribute not feeling anxious in a certain situation to the presence of the safety behaviour which increases our use of that safety behaviour. Gradual removal of safety behaviours helps us to learn to manage and overcome the anxiety.

## When does anxiety become a problem?

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time, and how we manage anxiety is key to preventing it from affecting us. Anxiety becomes a problem however, when the symptoms of anxiety (thoughts, emotions, behaviours and physical symptoms) interfere with an individual's normal daily activities. Some examples of these daily activities include being able to engage in self-care (showering, brushing teeth), attending school and other support agencies (such as doctors' appointments), engaging in interests, hobbies and social activities, socialising with family and friends.

If you feel that anxiety is interfering with your daily life, then you can seek support through a trusted adult at school. They may offer some 1:1 support or think about referring you to some helpful resources, a counselling service, or to the Mental Health Support Team.

## How can I help myself?

- ❖ *Notice what your triggers are* and notice if you avoid them, or use safety behaviour(s). If you do, then try and expose yourself to the trigger, or remove the safety behaviour(s).
- ❖ *Practicing mindfulness* helps you to focus on the present moment, and reduces the impact that anxious thoughts have on our fight or flight response. You can find guided mindfulness videos on Youtube.
- ❖ *Controlled breathing exercises* helps your nervous system to reset which reduces the amount of the stress hormone cortisol in the body, and signals the brain to be calm. Completing a breathing exercise once a day can help to reduce your overall levels of anxiety. *Try the one at the bottom of this page!*
- ❖ *Trying new things* helps your Amygdala to learn about different things, and also gives you the opportunity to become more confident and resilient and improve your coping skills - and you never know you might find a new hobby or interest!
- ❖ *Talking to someone* can help you to process and understand your feelings better. It is also helpful to share ideas about how you can help yourself with another person.



- 1 Inhale.** Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds.
- 2 Pause.** Hold the air in your lungs for 4 seconds.
- 3 Exhale.** Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds.  
**Tip:** Pucker your lips, as if you are blowing through a straw, to slow your exhalation.
- 4 Repeat.** Practice for at least 2 minutes, but preferably 5 to 10 minutes.