
WHAT IS ANXIETY?

What is anxiety, or rather, what do you know about anxiety?

When we ask these questions, many people find it hard to verbalize their understanding about what is anxiety; however, it's much easier for them to elaborate on how it makes them feel. For many, they will state they feel nervous, scared, tense or stressed. They also have an easier time elaborating the physical symptoms and manifestations of anxiety (Bourne, 2015; South West Yorkshire Mental Health; Gagnon. N.D.):



- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations
- Trembling or shaking
- Sweating
- Choking
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Numbness
- Dizziness
- Feelings of detachment
- Hot flashes or chills
- Fear of dying
- Fear of going crazy

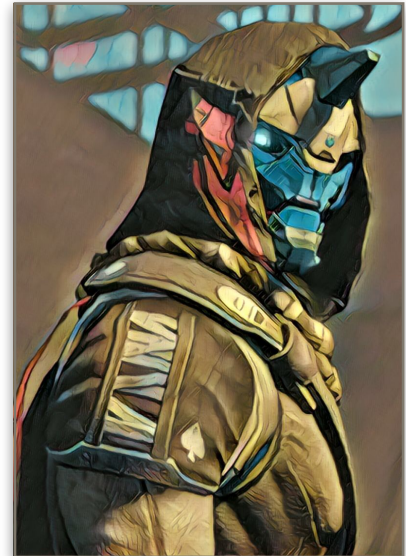
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While these physical symptoms are unpleasant at the time, they are completely normal reactions, all while not being dangerous.

But what is anxiety? How does it work?

Before defining anxiety, we must first understand what stress is. In its simplest form, stress is your brain reacting to a perceived threat and placing your body in a reactionary state. It is the product of thousands of years of evolution and associations made by our brain. It can also be described as our survival instinct and is also what keeps us from doing dangerous things, for example, jumping out of a plane with no parachute. While stress is something that is normal and helps us stay safe, stress becomes a problem when it's disproportionate to the situation.

If we would rewind time many thousands of years, when we were all cave people, what were our daily stressors? Many people answer that a search for food would be a stressor, also, the fact that we did not want to be food for other predators was another of our main stressors. As such, since we did not want to be prey to these predators, our brains have evolved to notice and make associations to warn us of potentially dangerous situations or threats. For example, when we are walking through the forest and we see leaves ruffle in the distance, what is the first thought that comes to mind? For many, the first thought is to wonder about what could be behind the bushes or trees as we have been conditioned to think this way. These kinds of thoughts and associations are what has kept us safe and alive over the years.



The “Flight” mode is just like it sounds; we want to escape or flee from the threat to a safer place.

If we would see a bear cross our path, our brain would see the bear and tell our body to react. The reason we say our brain sees the bear and not our eyes is due to the fact that our eyes are only receptors for light. They send this information through our optic nerve to the occipital lobe of our brain where it is interpreted to tell us what we see. When our brain sees the threat it's putting us in a “Fight or Flight” state. However, there is also a 3rd state that is often overlooked; we call this the “Freeze” state. These states are activated by the release of adrenaline and cortisol in our system from the sympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system.

Survival instinct is also what keeps us from doing dangerous things.

The “Fight” mode is just as it sounds; we take a stance to face our threat and combat it, with our bear example, it's picking up a stick and fighting against the bear.

The “Flight” mode is also just like it sounds; we want to escape or flee from the threat to a safer place. Using the same example with our bear, here we run away from the bear to a safer place.



As humans, we like to think we are highly evolved and intelligent individuals; however, our minds function in three fundamentals states; the reasonable mind, the emotional mind and the wise mind.

The third and often overlooked state is “Freeze.” With this state, people mention they become so overwhelmed, they feel frozen in place and are unable to move or react. An example of this is during natural disasters or big accidents, people mention they want to help someone in need, but they were unable to physically move as they were so overwhelmed with emotions.

Now that we know a bit more of what stress is, let’s fast forward to present time. As we don’t often see wild bears and predators on a daily basis, our sources of stress have changed. However, why do we not continue to have the same reaction in front of the bear when we see him at the zoo? People often say because they know they are in a safe place, but what tells them they are in a safe place? At this moment and time, our rational mind is taking over.

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The emotional mind is when someone's feelings and emotions are controlling their thoughts and behaviors. An example of this is when you have to communicate with someone who is very angry. How does this situation typically go? Most people say it generally doesn't go well. The reason behind this is because of their emotional state, the angry individual is currently unable to be rational; however, when they've had time to calm down, they are able to have a much more rational conversation.

The emotional mind is when someone's feelings and emotions are controlling their thoughts and behaviors.



An angry individual is currently unable to be rational.



The rational mind can be viewed as the opposite of the emotional mind. Here a person will use logic and reason in order to plan how they should act in a situation. An example of this would be a CEO of a large company that needs to lay off 400 employees. At this time, he/she would need to stay rational as being emotional would inhibit him/her from performing his/her duties at that time.

The rational mind will use logic and reason in order to plan how they should act in a situation.

The wise mind can be described as a balance between the two. Here people are able to recognize and understand their emotions; however, they are able to respond to them in a more rational manner. If we return to the example of the bear at the zoo, our emotional mind and stress can easily tell us that seeing a bear equals danger and the security measures put in place could fail at any moment. We nevertheless are able to use our wise mind to calm ourselves down as we know that the chances of the bear escaping its enclosure at the present time is highly improbable; this rational counteraction to our stress calms us down.

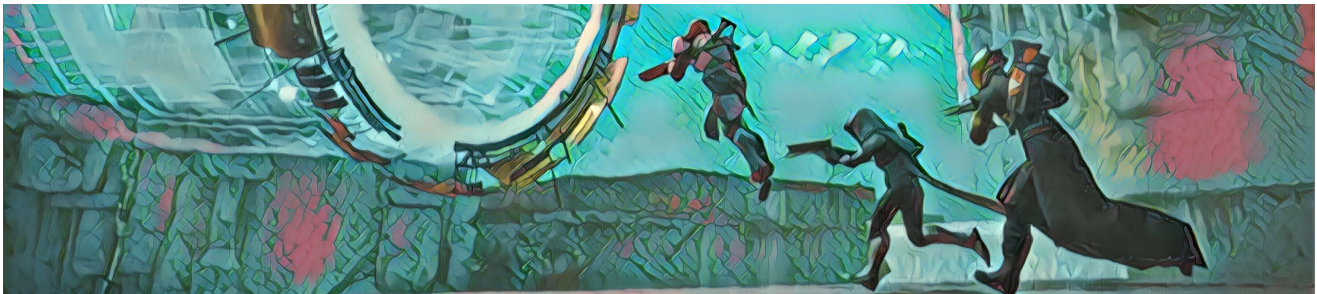
We are able to use our wise mind as this rational counteraction to our stress to calms us down.

As we do not see many predators in the wild anymore, what are now our daily stressors? Many people answer money, work, family responsibilities, traffic and many other sources of stress. If we take money, for example, money in itself should not really be a source of stress as it is an arbitrary value that humans have attributed to pieces of paper. However, when we think of a bill that needs to be paid tomorrow, and we don't have the funds in our account, we start to feel anxious. At this moment many people start to project themselves into the future and into different scenarios that are the result of them not having the money to pay the bill (ex. being on the street begging for money, the house being repossessed, having services shut down). This capacity for foresight is great for the advancement of humankind; however, it is also very detrimental for anxiety. While we like to think that our brains are highly evolved, they still have rather primitive tendencies that were learned to protect us, as such, when we imagine ourselves in these different scenarios, our brain has not evolved to identify the difference between what we are seeing and the scenarios we are imagining. Remember, the brain is what interprets the light that is captured by our eyes; therefore, when we imagine a stressful situation, our brain is unable to differentiate between the two. Our brain believes these scenarios to be real and will start to put our body into that reactionary "Fight, Flight or Freeze" state, which in turn produces all of the physical responses and symptoms that we often associate with anxiety.



The wise mind is able to recognize and understand emotions, responding to them in a more rational manner.

As we now understand that anxiety is our mind placing our body in survival mode due to a real or perceived threat, what are the different types of anxiety disorders?



Generalized Anxiety Disorder

We talk about an excessive and uncontrollable worry about a number of everyday problems or occurrences which persists for more than 6 months and interferes with the ability to focus on tasks.

Phobias

We talk about an intense and irrational fear of a specific thing. While many people have fears, a phobia tends to disrupt the person's life and daily activities as they will actively seek to avoid any situation which could potentially expose them to their feared object or situation.

Panic Disorders

With panic disorders, it involves panic attacks which can happen in unexpected situations and on a repeated basis. While a panic attack will be sudden and intense, it also happens for a short period. People who suffer from panic attacks also fear to have more panic attacks which can also result in triggering a panic attack.

Agoraphobia

Someone suffering from agoraphobia has a fear of being in a situation where they can't escape which can lead to panic attacks. As such, they tend to avoid public places or venturing from their homes.

Social Anxiety Disorder

With a social anxiety disorder, people have an intense fear of being embarrassed or receiving negative evaluations from others. As such, they often avoid social situations and can have significant impacts on their daily functioning at work, at school and with relationships.

