



Managing Your Anxiety

FEAR – experiencing the normal biological and psychological response (e.g. rapid heartbeat, changes in breathing, muscle tension, increased arousal, heightened perceptual focus) to a real threat to our safety. This elicits the well-known ‘flight or fight’ response and has served to ensure our survival and adaptation.

ANXIETY – experiencing the fear response as described above to a threat that is imagined or not truly threatening to our physical safety. This may well elicit an inappropriate or exaggerated response that is neither helpful nor adaptive.

People who experience anxiety can easily become overwhelmed by anxious experience itself and ill-equipped to effectively deal with the situation at hand. In order to better understand and manage anxiety, it’s important to take it apart. There are four phases to anxiety:

1. A Sensitive Trigger
2. The Interpretation
3. The Reaction
4. Your Response.

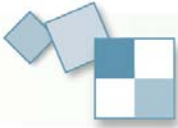
The Sensitive Trigger: Something triggers you to interpret a situation or event as threatening. The brain is a highly adaptive organ and it will make powerful connections to fearful experiences. This is a feature that is designed to protect us but in our world today this feature gets turned on when it doesn’t need to. If you have had a fear reaction to something in the past, then you may be quite sensitive to other similar situations. Imagine you had a poor report card as a child that was quite upsetting for you and your parents. Then subsequent situations where your performance is being scrutinized or reviewed may bring up similar anxiety, such as fears of:

- Loss of status (“They’ll find out I’m not very good”) or
- Ridicule (“They will laugh at me”)
- Criticism or rejection (the boss will not give me a bonus)

The Interpretation of the Event: How a person views or interprets a situation is a key factor in the anxiety response. Think about a person you know who likes to give public presentations and a person who hates it and gets nervous. The reality of the situation is similar (one person talking, some people listening) but each person views it differently.

If you are anxious about something at work then it is likely that you are interpreting one or more situations as threatening. It is frequent that, at this stage, people misinterpret the event or make a thinking error. If you are anxious about something that does not truly threaten your existence, it maybe wise to examine your beliefs and expectations about the situation to see if they are useful or even true. Here are the steps to check out your way of seeing the situation:

- Use your anxious response as a signal for yourself that something is ‘triggering’ you



- When you experience the signal, STOP what you are doing and give yourself a moment to think,
- Examine your thinking by trying to recollect what you have been thinking about. Were your thoughts catastrophic or realistic? What past experiences are coming to mind?
- Ask yourself, “What is the data or proof (here and now) that supports this belief?” If you are going to use this data to support your anxiety, then it should be realistic, objective and overwhelming. Otherwise, your interpretation and thoughts are not helping but hindering.

Ask yourself the following questions:

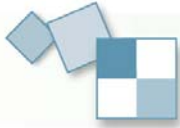
Am I making mountains out of molehills? Is this really a big deal?
Am I using a single experience and assuming it will be true all the time?
Am I forgetting to pay attention to other data or proof that the opposite is true?
Would a reasonable person come to the same conclusions?

***Example:** Mary thinks that her boss is going to be mad at her. As a result, she feels tense and she noticed that her heart is pounding. At this moment Mary should stop what she is doing and take a moment to reflect on her thinking. She should ask herself, “Is there any evidence that my boss is angry. Has he said he was angry? Is there any evidence contrary to my initial idea? Is it possible that if he is angry that he may be upset by something else? Even if he is angry with me, it isn’t the end of the world. I can handle it.”*

The Reaction: If you have interpreted a situation as dangerous, then you will likely experience a rush of adrenaline. Adrenaline is a natural chemical in the body that gets released by the Adrenal Gland when you believe you are in danger. Adrenaline causes a number of physical changes. You may notice an increase in your heart rate, cold hands and feet, your breathing changes. Focussing on these physiological changes increases our sense that something is wrong, thereby fuelling our anxiety. This is called the vicious circle of anxiety.

Rather than let this reaction run amuck, try the following:

- Sit calmly and slow your breathing down. Let your belly move out as you breathe in and let your shoulders slump when you exhale. Try to simply watch your breath as it enters and leaves your body. Stick with it for a minute.
- Tell yourself “I can handle this.” or “I don’t need to be afraid here. If I deal with the situation in a smart way I can manage” or, if this situation is similar to an old situation that you got anxious in, try “ This situation is not that same as before. If I just approach the situation slowly and thoughtfully, I can manage it.”
- Watch for negative thoughts such as “I can’t...”, “This is terrible.” Or “They will think I’m stupid” and try to just let them go. Try to think of all the times that you know you did cope well with a tough situation.
- You may need to take a break to slow down and eliminate the anxious response. Go for a brief walk or try leaving your work area and getting a drink of water.



The Response: Almost always, people who get anxious want to avoid the situation that is making them anxious. This may seem to be an understandable response; indeed this is often how we learn to avoid harm as a child. Nevertheless, it has a downside. Most importantly, we continue to find similar situations as sources of fear and don't learn that they may always be threatening. Nor do we learn more adaptive ways of coping and overcoming challenges.

Try to always engage and try your best not to run or avoid. The more you can engage the situation, the more power you have over the anxiety response and the less anxious you will be. If it feels like something you can't manage on your own, seek out a Psychologist or other mental health professional to help you with some quick tools to deal with anxiety.