

## **Understanding and Managing Anxiety**

In this series, we're going to discuss what anxiety is, where it comes from according to the cognitive model and provide some tips for how to manage it. Let's start by understanding the evolutionary origins of anxiety.

### **1. Evolutionary Origins of Anxiety (why we need anxiety) ~ 2.17 minutes**

What is the purpose of anxiety? Why do we experience this fear that can have such a negative impact on our lives? Although it may seem counter-productive, anxiety actually serves an important evolutionary function: to keep us alive. In a world that was full of danger, our brains evolved in a way that maximised our chances of survival. Early humans didn't have housing, supermarkets and artificial light and heat. They were exposed to the elements, natural disasters, predators and enemies.

For that reason, we have an in-built alarm system that's triggered when we sense a threat in our environment. This is the limbic system, which consists of various structures including the amygdala, the hypothalamus and the hippocampus. Let's say you're walking down the street and a polar bear suddenly jumps out in front of you. The amygdala would set off the alarm, the hippocampus would activate the appropriate behavioural response – the fight/flight response – and the hypothalamus would send a signal to the glands to release the chemicals that get us going.

That means, when we face danger, this in-built alarm system can save your life. In an environment that is highly dangerous and volatile, constantly experiencing anxiety is adaptive because it means we are always ready to act. So although most of us live in relatively safe conditions, there are other threats that can create a constant state of anxiety. The global pandemic, war, the cost-of-living crisis and climate change are a few examples. And even just watching or reading the news can be a highly anxiety-provoking activity.

But there is one other thing that can cause anxiety: our thoughts. So while anxiety has its purpose and place, the way we think can often create excessive and unnecessary anxiety. We construct scenarios and narratives that are not necessarily based on reality but nonetheless feel very real because our minds cannot tell the difference between what's real and what's vividly imagined. As such our mind can be the cause of anxiety even in the absence of a threat.

## **2. Normal vs Excessive Anxiety ~ 2.30 minutes**

Anxiety describes a feeling of worry, nervousness, unease or fear. It's part of the spectrum of emotions and as discussed, serves the important function of keeping us alive. Therefore, experiencing anxiety from time to time or when there is a threat is normal. It comes with a physiological response, which varies between people but often includes a rapid heartbeat and breathing, sweating, stomach churning, and light-headedness. We can experience these bodily sensations when we have to give a talk in front of people, before an exam or interview, or on our wedding day. These situations can feel threatening in some way – maybe because we fear failure, embarrassing ourselves or making a mistake, or simply because we're coming out of our comfort zone. It's entirely normal to experience this kind of anxiety, which tends to subside once we get started or when it's done. Although it feels uncomfortable, it isn't distressing and we can rationalise it because we know the trigger.

Excessive anxiety is different. There's often no specific reason for it and it can last for hours, days, weeks, or even longer. It can make you feel like you've lost control, like your thoughts and body are betraying you and there's nothing you can do to stop it. You might feel paralysed, unable to leave the house or interact with other people. You might have a strong urge to run away, to try and escape the overwhelming feeling of panic and stress. Although there can be a wave of negative thoughts and worries, there doesn't seem to be a specific reason for it and it can seem like it comes out of nowhere.

When anxiety presents in this way, it is excessive and has surpassed the normal range. Instead of being life-saving, it feels life-threatening. But despite this, it is still your mind and body signalling to you that something is out of balance. Something is going on within you that needs

addressing urgently. Experiencing this kind of anxiety requires you to look deep within and address the underlying causes that you might not be consciously aware of right now. However, as mentioned, the current state of the world and our way of life is anxiety-provoking and that must be acknowledged because it allows you to be gentler with yourself, to show yourself compassion and understanding. But that's not to say that we can't do anything about anxiety and that we're victims of the external world. The cognitive model of anxiety can offer some insight into where excessive anxiety comes from and how to manage it.

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