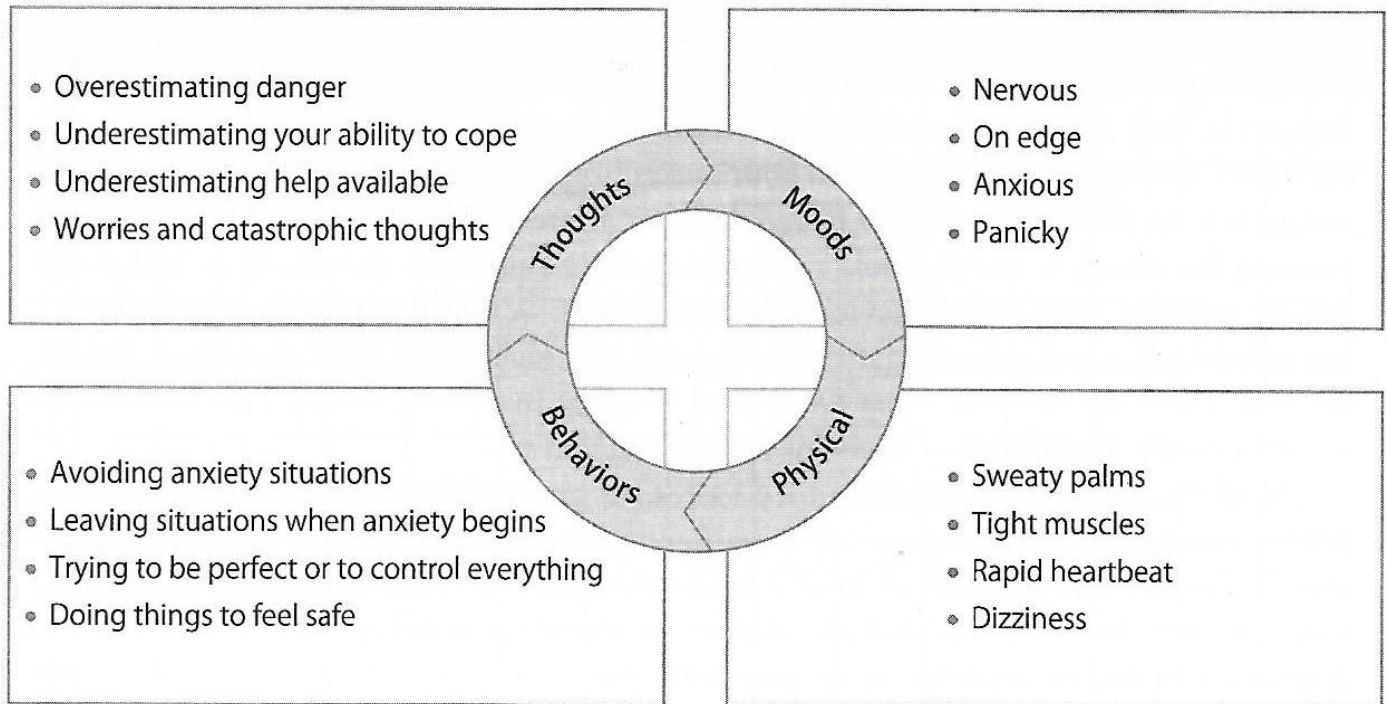


Understanding Your Anxiety

The symptoms of Anxiety include cognitive (thought), behavioural, emotional, and physical changes



Notice that cognitive symptoms of anxiety include thoughts about danger or bad things happening, thoughts that you won't be able to cope, and various other worries. These thoughts often occur as images, not just words. When anxious, we tend to avoid situations and places where we might feel uncomfortable or anxious. Avoidance is the most common behaviour associated with anxiety. There are many physical symptoms of anxiety, including shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, dry mouth, sweating, muscle tension, shakiness, dizziness, nausea or stomach problems, hot flashes or chills, frequent urination, restlessness, and even difficulty swallowing. A number of words are used to describe an anxious mood, such as "nervous," "panicky," or "on edge."

Life experiences can contribute to or trigger anxiety. Trauma (being physically, emotionally, or sexually abused or bullied; being in an automobile accident; being in a war); illnesses or deaths; things we are taught ("Snakes will bite you," "If you get dirty, you'll get sick"); things we observe (an article in the newspaper about a plane crash, "My heart just missed a beat"); and experiences that seem too much to handle (giving a public speech, job promotion or termination, having a new baby) can all lead to feelings of anxiety.

All these physical, behavioral, and thinking changes we experience when we are anxious are part of the anxiety responses called "fight, flight, or freeze." These three responses can be adaptive when we face danger. To see how this is so, imagine that you are in a new town. You decide to go for a walk at night and find yourself lost on a dark street. You notice a large man approximately 20 yards away walking toward you. You believe that he sees you and think that he is going to attack and rob you. What should you do? One option would be

to fight. To do this, your heart would pump faster, your breathing would speed up, and your muscles would tense. Sweating would help cool your body. As you can see, all these body changes would be helpful in this situation. These changes make up the "fight" response.

But maybe you do not think fighting the man is a good idea. Perhaps you think it would be better to run. To run fast, you would also need an accelerated heart rate, plenty of oxygen, muscle tension, and sweating. Therefore, the same physical changes that make up the "fight" response make up the "flight" response. You simply use the extra energy to run rather than to stay and do battle. With a little luck, running may save you from being attacked.

A third response that might work well would be to freeze. Maybe the man has not seen you, and perhaps if you are very still, he will not notice you. In this case, a total freeze would require you to have very tense, rigid muscles. With a tight chest, even your breathing would be invisible to him. These types of physical changes that help you to be very still are part of the "freeze" response.

These three anxiety responses — fight, flight, and freeze — are good reactions to danger. Anxiety is adaptive when dangers are real and serious. So we don't really want to get rid of anxiety completely. Think of anxiety as similar to our pain response: It would be quite risky if we did not experience pain, because then we wouldn't know to pull our hands away from a hot stove. In the same way, we rely on our anxiety responses to alert us to dangers that we might need to face or manage.

Unfortunately, we also experience anxiety when watching a movie about a robbery or when standing in front of a group of people to give a speech. CBT teaches methods to reduce your anxiety when danger is not present, when the danger is not as serious as you might think, or when too much anxiety interferes with your good coping. Anxiety treatment's goals are to help you assess the degree of danger more quickly and learn how to reduce your anxiety responses when dangers are smaller than you imagine or can be managed through coping. Often this means needing to approach what you fear, in order to learn more about the degree of danger and your ability to cope with it.