

What happens in the body during anxiety

What is anxiety?

Most people experience anxiety from time to time, and some experience it more often than others. It often feels uncomfortable and can be extremely stressful, but anxiety is not dangerous. Basically, anxiety is a normal reaction that is meant to help and protect you. Anxiety becomes a problem when you let it control your reactions and behaviours, limiting you and creating difficulties in life.

What triggers anxiety and how it is experienced can vary greatly from person to person. Common symptoms include chest pressure, stomach pain, difficulty breathing, and dizziness. You may also have panic attacks.

The fight-or-flight response

When you become anxious, the body activates the fight-or-flight response. This response exists to help you react and respond to potential threats in your environment. The body initiates several reactions to protect you:

- The heart beats faster to pump more oxygen-rich blood to your muscles, which can cause palpitations. You may experience heart palpitations.
- You start breathing faster to supply oxygen to the muscles.
- The muscles tense, preparing you to flee or defend yourself if necessary.
- Digestion slows down because the body prioritises functions that are less critical for immediate survival. This can cause you to get a stomach ache, feel sick or need to go to the toilet.

False alarm

The fight-or-flight response is triggered not only by real dangers but also by imagined ones. This can become a problem as the brain has difficulty distinguishing between real and perceived threats. You can trigger the fight-or-flight response with your thoughts. Thoughts are interpreted as potential threats, and the body reacts to protect you, without knowing it's a false alarm. For example: you might remind yourself of the time you were almost hit by a car and experience the same symptoms as if it were happening again.

The anxiety curve

The anxiety curve is a model that illustrates the intense activation that occurs in the body (the fight-or-flight response) when you experience anxiety. You may notice an increasing heart rate, a surge of adrenaline, or the onset of sweating. The anxiety curve

shows how anxiety typically rises, reaches a peak, and then decreases on its own. When the body reacts to a perceived threat, anxiety can quickly increase, and it can feel like it will only continue to get stronger. But the body cannot stay on full alert forever. If you stay in the situation and do not flee or avoid it, the anxiety will eventually start to decrease, even if it takes some time.

When this happens, the body learns: *“This was unpleasant, but it passed.”* Over time, this may mean that the anxiety does not become as strong or does not last as long.

How can I learn to manage anxiety?

- Remind yourself of what is happening in your body and why you feel the way you do. Keep in mind that it is normal, and even good, for your body to react by trying to protect you.
- Engage in activities that make you feel good. This could be moving your body, cooking, talking with a friend, or doing a hobby at home.
- When the fight-or-flight response is triggered, it is common to tense your muscles. To calm down and reduce stress in the moment, you can do breathing or relaxation exercises. These exercises help your muscles relax and your heart rate and breathing slow down.
- By practising mindfulness, you can more easily focus on what is happening in the here and now. Try to shift your focus from your thoughts and what you feel in your body to what is happening around you.

Exposure

Exposure is an effective method for learning to manage anxiety. It involves gradually confronting what feels difficult or distressing. By doing this, you learn that the situation is actually manageable, even if it feels challenging. The discomfort decreases as your sense of being able to handle the situation increases.

Conscious presence

A simple exercise is to choose three things you hear, three things you see, and three smells you notice, and then describe them to yourself. In the beginning, it is easier to practice this when you don't have anxiety. Take a moment right now to practice this. Can you shift your focus between different senses? Describe what you see. Notice the sounds you can pick out from your surroundings. Use your sense of touch to feel the difference between various materials around you.