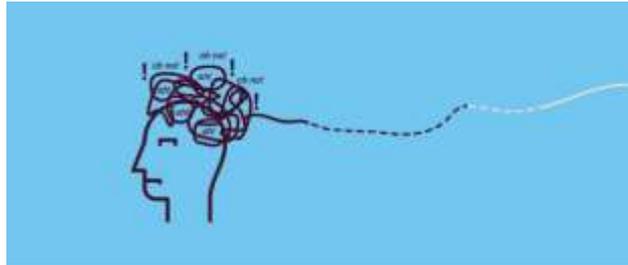


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Psychoeducation Series

Understanding and Managing Anxiety



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- What's the Difference Between Stress and Anxiety?
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- Four Principles of Anxiety
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- Weighted or Calming Blankets for Anxiety
- Resources (references, podcasts, videos).
- Appendix (types of anxiety disorders & the central nervous system)

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What's the Difference Between Stress and Anxiety?

Most people experience stress and anxiety at some point in their lives. They are not abnormal feelings or reactions.

Stress and anxiety often go together, with stressful events or experiences triggering feelings of anxiety.

People under stress experience mental and physical symptoms, such as irritability, anger, fatigue, muscle pain, digestive troubles, and difficulty sleeping.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is defined by persistent, excessive worries that don't go away even in the absence of a stressor. Anxiety leads to a nearly identical set of symptoms as stress: insomnia, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, muscle tension, and irritability.

[American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#)

Stress	Anxiety
<p>Stress is a perfectly normal response of the body to some type of change, demand, or threat.</p> <p>Usually, it's caused by an external trigger (event or situation).</p> <p>The trigger can be short-term (e.g. a work deadline or an argument with a loved one), or long-term (e.g. poverty, discrimination or chronic illness).</p> <p>Eustress (positive) vs Distress (bad stress)</p> <p>Eustress is a positive stress response, involving optimal levels of stimulation – a type of stress that results from challenging but attainable and enjoyable or worthwhile tasks (e. g. participating in a sport event, working on a challenging project).</p> <p>Acute Stress</p> <p>The intense stress experienced as an immediate perceived threat, either physical, emotional or psychological.</p> <p>Chronic Stress</p> <p>The stress resulting from continuous or repeated exposure to situations that lead to the release of stress hormones. It can lead to burnout.</p> 	<p>Anxiety is also normal. It is a feeling of fear, worry or nervousness. It is a person's specific reaction to stress. Its origin is internal.</p> <p>Anxiety is a persistent feeling of apprehension or dread in situations that are not actually threatening.</p> <p>Unlike stress, anxiety persists even after a concern has passed or in the absence of a stressor – a persistent and excessive worry that won't go away.</p> <p>Leads to almost identical set of symptoms as stress: Insomnia, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, muscle tension and irritability.</p> <p>In severe cases, anxiety can escalate into an anxiety disorder. There are seven types of anxiety disorders:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agoraphobia 2. Panic Disorder 3. Separation Anxiety 4. Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) 5. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) 6. Social Phobia or Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) 7. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) 

Assessment of Anxiety

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21) is a reliable and valid questionnaire designed to measure the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress. You complete the DASS-21 online free of charge by accessing this link:

[Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – Short Form \(DASS-21\)](#)

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress.



Symptoms of Stress

Responses to stress can have a physical, emotional, or mental symptoms, such as:



Specific examples

- You find it hard to wind down.
- You tended to over-react to situations.
- You feel that you're using a lot of nervous energy.
- You found yourself getting agitated.
- You found it difficult to relax.
- You are intolerant of anything that keeps you from getting on with what you are doing.
- You feel that you're rather touchy (easily upset, offended or oversensitive).
- You feel scared without any good reason.

Anxiety becomes problematic when it is out of control and impacts your life in significantly negative ways.

Excessive anxiety can cause similar issues as chronic stress: Emotional distress and physical symptoms.

High anxiety, or an anxiety disorders, may prevent you from doing things in your everyday life (e.g. meeting up with friends, going to school, going to work, going shopping, or trying something new).



Symptoms of Anxiety

Anxiety can trigger your flight-or-fight stress response and release a flood of chemicals and hormones, like adrenaline, into your system. At certain times, people with anxiety may experience:

- Dizziness
- Muscle tension or pain
- Restlessness
- Nervousness
- Tenseness
- Sleeplessness
- Trouble concentrating
- Racing heartbeat
- Fast breathing
- Shaking or trembling
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Loss of energy
- Sweating
- Cold, clammy hands
- Chest pain
- Stomach ache
- Dry mouth
- Feeling of unease or dread

Specific examples

- You experience of dryness of your mouth.
- You experienced breathing difficulty (e.g. excessively rapid breathing, or breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion).
- You experienced trembling (e.g. in the hands).
- You worry about situations in which you might panic and make a fool of yourself.
- You feel you're close to panic.
- You are aware of the action of your heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g. sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat).

Four Principles of Anxiety

1. Anxiety Can't Harm You

Experiencing anxiety doesn't mean that you're going crazy; it means you're normal.

Anxiety can't harm you. It's usually you that mistakenly interprets signs of anxiety as being possibly harmful.

Anxiety is not necessarily a pleasant feeling, but is the psychological indicator of something you need to pay attention to and explore in your life.

When feeling anxious, text yourself: "Anxiety can't harm me. I can still do what I need to do!"

2. Anxiety is Uncomfortable but an Acceptable and Unavoidable Part of Life

Anxiety is a normal feeling people experience when faced with threat, danger, or when stressed. When we are anxious, we feel upset, uncomfortable, and tense.

Feelings of anxiety can be a result of life experiences, such as: Relationship conflicts or breakdown; job loss; serious illness; major accident; or death of someone close. Feeling anxious in these situations is appropriate and usually we feel anxious for only a limited period of time.

Because feelings of anxiety are so common, it is important to understand the difference between feeling anxious appropriate to a situation, and the symptoms of an anxiety disorder.

3. Distinguish Between Normal Feelings of Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are a group of illnesses characterised by persistent feelings of high anxiety, and extreme discomfort and tension. Three signs to recognise them:

1. The harder you try to make it go away, the stronger and stronger it gets.
2. You feel in danger, when you're actually safe (perceived vs actual safety).
3. Your anxiety, or attempts to avoid anxiety, interferes with your ability to function. It stops you from facing life.

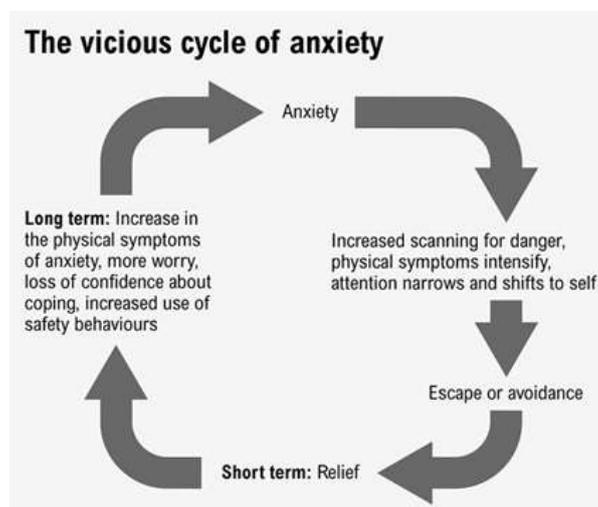
❖ *If this the case, see a psychologist. Also refer to the Appendix section to read the types of anxiety disorders and associate common behaviours.*

4. Avoidance Grows Anxiety: The Anxiety Cycle

Avoidance allows anxiety to develop and propagate or grow. It generates 'The Anxiety Cycle'.

Avoiding dangerous things (e.g. running front of traffic) is normal, reasonable and sensible.

But if you avoid things that most people think are safe, then you may need to deal with what may be inappropriate anxiety. Avoiding things that make you anxious never allows you to find out the reality of the threat – it may not be a threat at all.



Five Powerful Techniques to Manage Your Anxiety

1. Focus on How Your Feelings Change Over Time

This technique entails observing how your feelings of anxiety change over time.

Bouts of anxiety tend to be short. So, don't try to fight or suppress them, rather accept them and say to yourself that it's OK to be anxious.

To observe how your anxiety changes over a short period of time, you can use a scale to detect these changes. For example, you can use a scale from 0 to 10:

0 ----- 10

Anxiety Level	None	Mild	Mild-Moderate	Moderate	Moderate-High	Highest
Faces						

Message/text yourself

Another technique to use when you're feeling anxious is via your mobile phone to message/text to yourself:

"I'm feeling anxious and that's OK"

2. Catch the Underlying Assumption and Find the Logical Conclusions

Setting the highest standards for everything you do, all the time, is a recipe for stress and anxiety. So, try to identify and understand any kinds of rigid rules that you may have, and replace these with more realistic expectations.

Five common examples of rigid rules (or 'Irrational Beliefs'), either conscious or unconscious, are:

- "I must always be liked, accepted or loved by everyone"
- "I must never let anyone down"
- "Life should always be fair"
- "I always need to be in full in control of everything I do"
- "I always should be happy"

Write down some of these rigid rules or beliefs you live your life by and try to think of some more reasonable alternatives.

For example: "I need to be fully in control of everything I do", could become "I will do my best, but accept that some things are out of my control".

In this way, you find contradictions to the conclusion of the anxiety or fear.

Message/text yourself

You can also use your mobile phone to message/text to yourself:

"No one is perfect. I will live my life using realistic rules."

3. Chew it Over, Act Normal and Trick Your Brain

Your Nervous Systems

[The Autonomic Nervous System \(ANS\)](#) acts largely unconsciously and regulates bodily functions, such as the heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal.

The ANS has two divisions or sub-systems: **Sympathetic and Parasympathetic**. They both have different functions. They act in your body like the accelerator and brakes in a car.

The **sympathetic** system is the **accelerator**, always ready to rev up and take you out of danger.

The **parasympathetic** system is the **brakes** – it slows you down.

How the Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Nervous Systems Work?

When you perceive danger (e.g. a threat, strong fear, or preoccupation), the **sympathetic** nervous system is activated very quickly. It's like an alarm system – the **'Fight or Flight'** response.

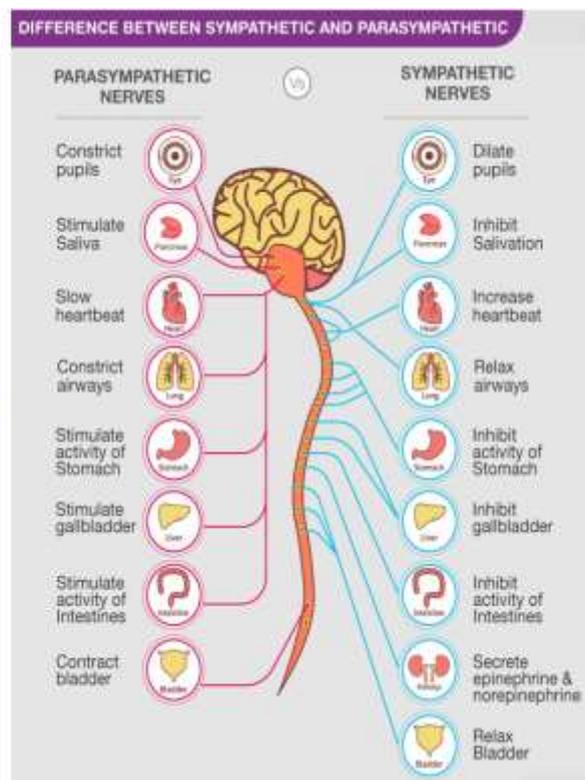


It releases corticotropin and adrenocorticotropin (hormones that keep the body on high alert and ready for intense physical activity) until the brain perceives that the danger has passed.

Once the perceived threat is over, cortisol levels decline and the **parasympathetic** nervous system slows the stress response by releasing hormones that relax the mind and body, while inhibiting or slowing many of the high energy functions of the body.

The **parasympathetic** nervous system performs maintenance activities and conserves body energy.

That's why it's called the **'Rest & Digest' or 'Feed & Breed'** system.



Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS).

Decreases your metabolism.

It's the **'Rest & Digest' or 'Feed & Breed'** system.

Functions like the **breaks** in a car.

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS).

Activates your metabolism.

It's the **'Fight or Flight'** response.

Functions like the **accelerator** or gas pedal in a car.

You can use various techniques to activate your **Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS)** and cause a relaxation response in your body.

You can alter the feedback loop to the **Parasympathetic, 'Rest & Digest' or 'Feed & Breed' Nervous System** by doing any activities associated with that system. These are some examples:

- Talk softly
- Smile
- Laugh
- Use chewing gum to produce saliva
- Yawn
- Breathe deeply
- Have an open body posture
- [Practice progressive muscular relaxation](#)

4. Use Relaxation and Visualisation

Relaxation, visualisation and imagery also stimulate your parasympathetic nervous system.

For example, imagine yourself in a peaceful place that you really like. This could be the ocean at sunset, a mountain stream, a beautiful lush forest, a secluded beach, a field of wildflowers, or any place you enjoy and feel relaxed.

As you visualise the place in this imagery, your senses and focus bodily sensations. Hear the sounds of the waves, feel the breeze on your face, and smell the scent of the flowers. You'll feel relaxed quickly.

Psychological strategies to enhance motivation and manage anxiety:

[Relaxation](#)

[Mental Rehearsal/Visualisation/Imagery](#)

[Using Visualization to Reduce Anxiety Symptoms](#)

[Simple Steps to Start Practicing Guided Imagery for Anxiety Relief](#)

[Ease Anxiety with These 5 Visualization Techniques](#)

[Guided imagery](#)

[Visualization meditation](#)

5. Face Your Fears

When avoiding something, message/text to yourself:

"Anxiety feeds off avoidance. I'll try and find a way to face my fears".



"So, then, whenever confronted with a ghost walk straight into it. And it will disappear."

— Alan Watts



Resources

[Help for Anxiety: Facing Your Fears Will Heal Your Brain](#)

[6 Tips to Overcoming Anxiety and Phobias](#)

[How to overcome fear and anxiety](#)

Weighted or Calming Blankets for Anxiety

Finally, although less researched, you could consider using a weighted blanket.

Weighted blankets resemble a heavy quilt, with metal, glass or plastic weights sewn into pockets and evenly distributed beneath the cover.

The weight of the blanket simulates the feeling of being hugged or held, and there are claims that they can have an impact on your mood and calm the nervous system.



[Adults Weighted Blanket](#)



Chen, H. Y., Yang, H., Chi, H. J., & Chen, H. M. (2013). Physiological effects of deep touch pressure on anxiety alleviation: The weighted blanket approach. *Journal of Medical and Biological Engineering*, 33(5), 463-470.

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Chen, H. Y., Yang, H., Meng, L. F., Chan, P. Y. S., Yang, C. Y., & Chen, H. M. (2016). Effect of deep pressure input on parasympathetic system in patients with wisdom tooth surgery. *Journal of the Formosan Medical Association*, 115(10), 853-859. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfma.2016.07.008>

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Books

Cross, M. (2020). *Anxiety: Expert Advice from a Neurotic Shrink Who's Lived with Anxiety All His Life*. HarperCollins Australia.

Davey, G. (2018). *The Anxiety Epidemic: The Causes of Our Modern-Day Anxieties*. London, UK: Robinson.

Bourne, E. J., & Garano, L. (2016). *Coping with anxiety: Ten simple ways to relieve anxiety, fear, and worry*. New Harbinger Publications.

Podcasts

#068 - The Anxiety Epidemic (Prof. Graham Davey)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aVk_O2l-U8

Videos

How to stop feeling anxious about anxiety | Tim Box | TEDxFolkestone

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZidGozDhOjg>

Parasympathetic Response: Train your Nervous System to turn off Stress. (Anxiety Skills #11)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FpKpW0EhYo>

Rewiring the Anxious Brain - Neuroplasticity and the Anxiety Cycle (Anxiety Skills #21)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTuX_ShUrw0

How to Use the Soft Palate to Trigger Calm-Hack the Parasympathetic Nervous System- Anxiety Skill#13

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPdd5mbDJhc>

Pelvic Floor Relaxation (Anxiety Skills #10)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmHqmMDIc_Q

How to Turn off the Fight, Flight, Freeze Response: Anxiety Skills #4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agdpFsKGdOE>

Autonomic Nervous System: Sympathetic vs Parasympathetic, Animation

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D96mSq2_h0c

Appendix

TYPES OF ANXIETY DISORDERS

ANXIETY DISORDER*	COMMON BEHAVIORS
Separation anxiety disorder: Excessive fear/anxiety about being separated from a major person of attachment.	Sleeping with caregiver, following them around, avoiding school/camp/other activities.
Generalized anxiety disorder: General feeling of dread linked to the perception of the unpredictability or uncontrollability of events or situations.	Seeks constant reassurance, difficulty focusing due to worries, difficulty sleeping, irritable/restless.
Social anxiety disorder: Fear of embarrassment or humiliation by others.	Avoidance behaviors (raising hand or speaking in class, ordering food in restaurants, talking on the phone).
Panic disorder: Fear of panic attacks or consequences.	Avoids activities, such as heavy exercise, linked to strong sensations; avoids places where prior panic attacks have occurred.
Agoraphobia: Fear of being in places where escape may be difficult or help not available.	Avoids leaving the house and crowded/ enclosed spaces.
Specific phobia: Fear of specific object or situation.	Intense fear of specific objects, such as an animal, needles, or blood, and avoids them.
Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) Fear of unwanted thoughts, images, or urges.	Constant worries about germs, harming others; engages in ritualized activities such as hand washing.

*Types of anxiety disorders listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-5), except for OCD that is now listed in "Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders" category. From Chiu A, et al.⁷

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