

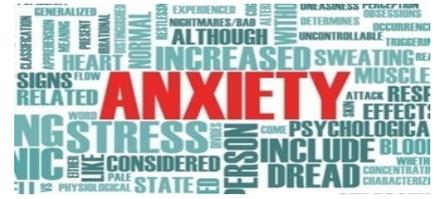
Insight into...



What is Anxiety?

Health & Wellbeing Series: A1

May2020



@WL_EPS

"Anxiety's like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but it doesn't get you very far" - Jodi Picoult

What is Anxiety?

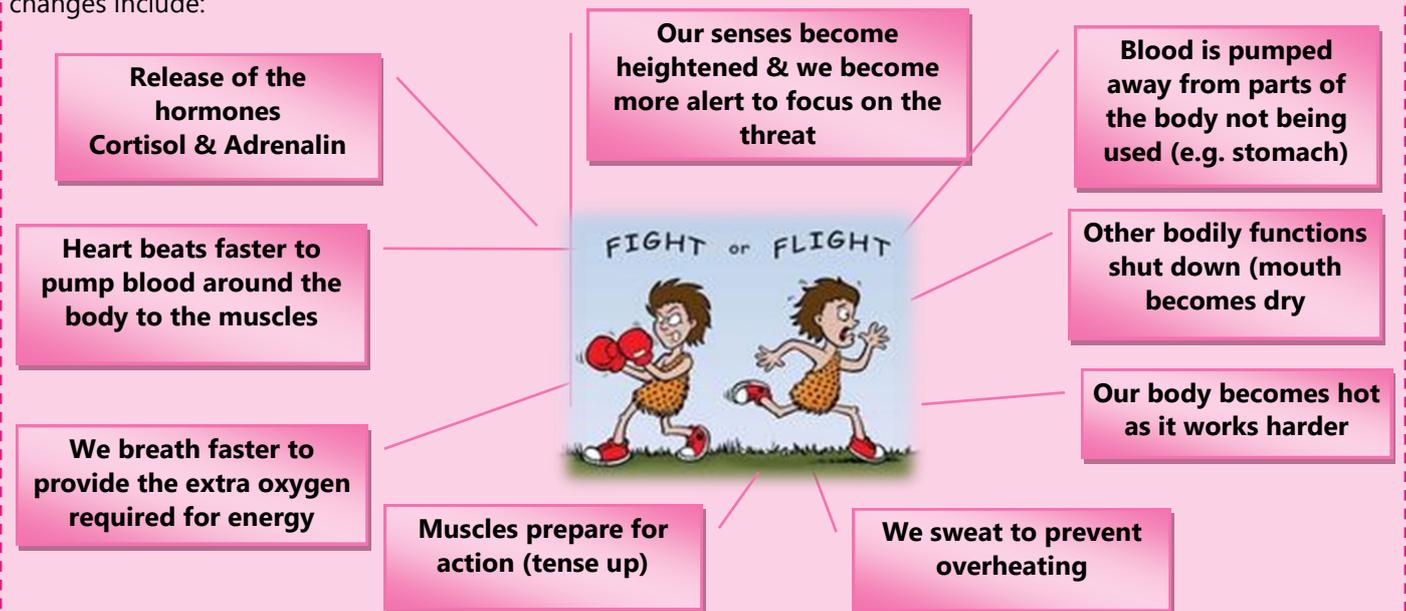
Anxiety is a normal reaction that helps us to cope with difficult, challenging or dangerous situations. Everyone will feel anxious at some point in their life and it can affect us all in different ways and at different times. Anxiety has three main functions:

- ◆ **Cognitive**—primes the mind to be able to detect and avoid danger by appraising events and situations for risk
- ◆ **Behavioural**—helps us learn to anticipate and avoid danger to stay safe
- ◆ **Physiological**—prepares our body for action (fight or flight)

Anxiety is triggered when we are confronted with a situation or challenge that is perceived to be threatening. In certain situations anxiety can be a good thing as it can motivate you to finish a task, work harder for a goal and it can alert you to dangerous situations.

Fight or Flight Response

When humans were developing we had an alarm system in our brain that warned us about things that might hurt us, for example if a tiger was about to pounce or if there was a fire. When this happens, chemicals are released so that our body prepares itself for some form of physical action, often referred to as the "Fight or Flight" response. These changes include:



Once the threat has gone, our bodies return to normal and we usually end up feeling better. However if the feelings of anxiety become overwhelming then our ability to concentrate and do well may suffer.

Why do some people feel more anxious than others?

There are relatively few real threats to our physical safety, however people can feel anxious for a number of reasons:

- ◆ **Past experiences:** If something distressing happened to you in the past, and you were unable to deal with your emotions at the time, you may become anxious about facing similar situations again. Or it may have been something you learned early on in life.
- ◆ **Everyday life and habits:** Caffeine, excess sugar, poor diet, bereavement, drug misuse, exhaustion and stress are all things which can mimic and trigger the symptoms of anxiety.
- ◆ **Fear of Losing control:** Some people worry about the future. Sometimes, if you feel you are not in control of your life, you can start to feel anxious about events out with your control
- ◆ **Imagined threat:** many people feel anxious because they imagine threat and feel psychologically at risk. They worry about what might happen. Because they are imagining threat, some people live in a constant state of anxiety.

When does Anxiety Become a Problem?

While we all feel anxious for short periods of time or in certain situations for some people anxiety can take over. If the anxiety stays at a high level for a long time, you may feel that it is difficult to deal with everyday life. Sometimes, if the feelings of fear overwhelm you, you may experience a panic attack. Anxiety becomes a problem when:

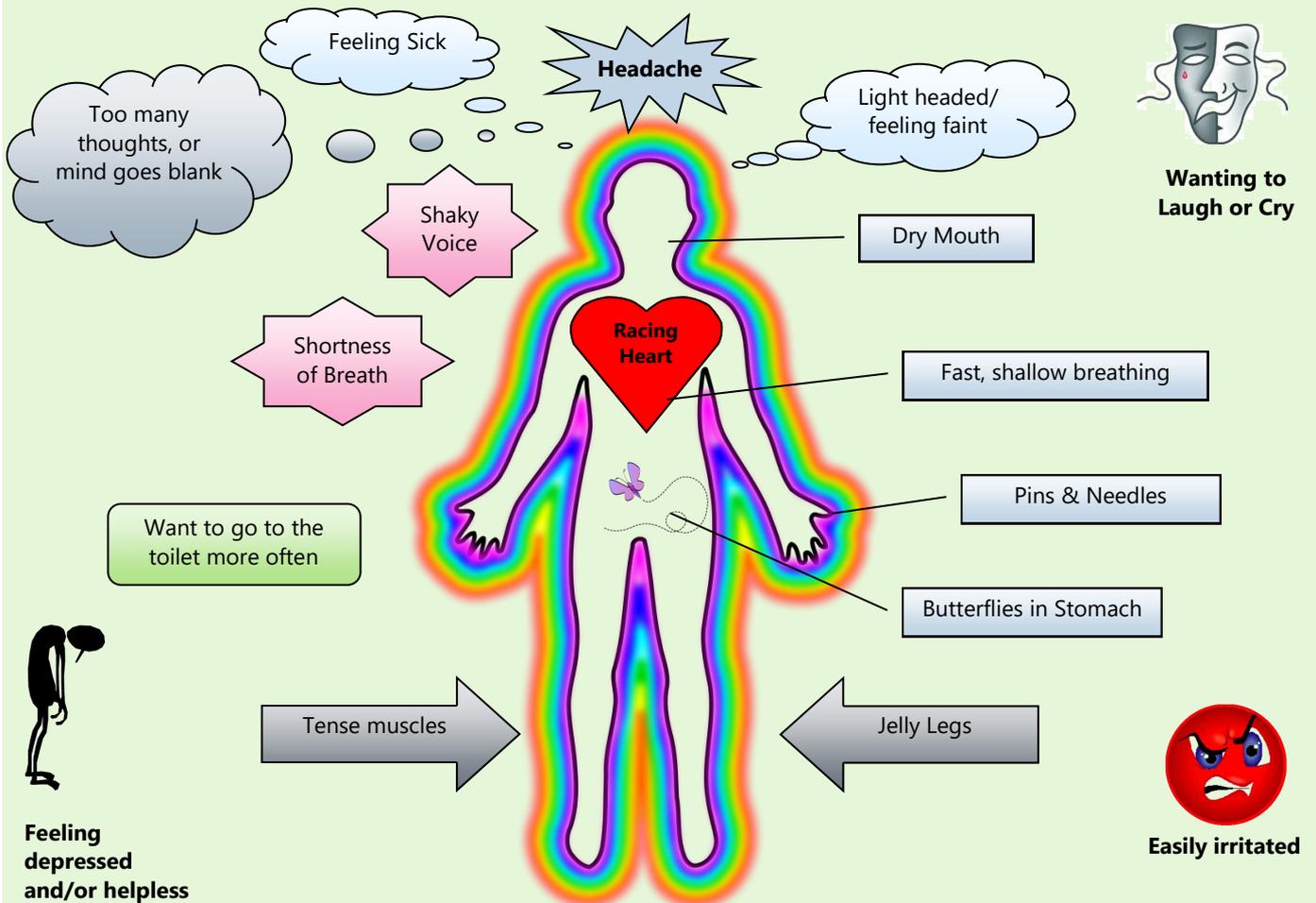
- ◆ **Persistence**—the frequency and duration of physical symptoms and feelings of anxiety persist for a prolonged period of time
- ◆ **Interference**—when the effects of anxiety begin to impact on relationships, task performance or if there is a high level of avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations
- ◆ **Severity**—with regards to the level of discomfort and distress of the physical symptoms and feelings of anxiety

When anxiety takes over and stops you from doing things you love and enjoying life, then you may benefit from further direct help.



Symptoms of Anxiety

When we become anxious our body still tries to prepare itself for the “danger”. Common signs include:



Everyone reacts differently. What signs do you notice when you become anxious?

Managing Anxiety

There are many things you can do to reduce your anxiety including maintaining a healthy lifestyle, breathing and relaxation techniques, challenging your thinking and talking to someone. See Insight A3, Anxiety Management Strategies for more details.

Further Supports and Information

www.samh.org.uk

Anxiety.org.uk

Youngminds.org.uk

Mind.org.uk

Childline.org.uk

Scottish Association for Mental Health

Helpline: 03444 775 774

Text support: text YM to 85258

Online help tool

Helpline: 0800 1111; 1-2-1 counsellor chat or online support tool

