

## Breaking out of the anxiety cycle

Anxiety has become a widespread phenomenon. It helps to be armed with some basic knowledge!

**In this context a threat** is anything that could directly or indirectly cause physical or social discomfort or harm, or that reminds the subconscious mind of a similar, prior situation.

**Fear** is a feeling of apprehensiveness or unease in response to a definite, real and immediate threat or danger. Extreme fear becomes panic.

**Worry** is a normal psychological state caused by thought processes in response to realistic concerns. It is experienced in the mind, is specific and is meant to trigger problem solving behaviour. It is anticipatory in nature and creates mild emotional distress that disappears when issues are resolved. However, chronic worry often leads to feelings of anxiousness.

**Anxiety:** is a feeling of apprehensiveness or unease when there is no imminent danger present. It is invariably accompanied by feelings of impending doom. Anxiety comes from the mind's vision of possible dangers that may result in a threatening or dangerous situation. It is experienced in the body as stress that can remain even after the stressor is gone.

**Anxiety cycle:** If the anxiety does not resolve, the senses pick up the body's state of stress, telling the mind that "Something is going wrong!" Next, the mind anticipates a threat, causing the anxiety to intensify, which the senses pick up again... Thus the sufferer gets trapped in a cycle of increasing anxiety.

**Anxiety and its intensity differs from person to person, but its harmful and debilitating effects are very real to the person experiencing the anxiety!**

**The anxiety cycle can be broken with professional help!**

## Anxiety and the subconscious mind

The subconscious mind is programmed to protect your life. It continuously makes quick but superficial assessments of your current situation, your thoughts and feelings around it, AND any potential patterns, links and similarities with any situations from your past.

Should it find any potential similarities with past threats or anxiety episodes, it will try to act pro-actively. Since its intent is your protection, it naturally gets first priority in your mind. It therefore activates an anxiety reaction in your mind and a stress reaction in your body (often even triggering a fight/flight response) to prepare you for the worst possible outcome.

This happens subconsciously and instinctively, separate from the thinking processes in your brain. It is real, due to your brain physiology, and has very little to do with your conscious thinking abilities! Once the instinctive anxiety reaction has been activated, it is therefore very hard to override through sheer willpower even if you are aware of what is happening.

## The anxiety cycle

The original anxious response may be compared to a snowball.

Each subsequent anxious response builds further on the original, similar to a snowball gathering more snow, growing in size and gathering more momentum as it rolls down a hill. The associated anxiety grows in a similar way. Each repetition serves as further confirmation that the perceived threat is real, and consequently it prepares the subconscious mind to respond even more intensely to the perceived threat.

On top of all that and often invisible to you, the physical stress response in the body starts setting off even more subconscious alarms – increasingly dominating significant parts of your life.

This is all the more frustrating because the way in which anxiety presents itself, often does not appear linked to the original anxious response. Consequently, it is not easy for the sufferer to understand the true origin of their anxiety, nor is it easy or even possible to break the cycle without outside, professional help. When left untreated, anxiety can escalate to the point of debilitating panic attacks, or in many cases lead to depression.

## Direct examples of ways in which anxiety can present itself

Anxiety, stress, panic attacks, test anxiety, anything which suggests excessive fear or feelings of sustained helplessness, where one cannot see a way forward or out of the situation.

## Indirect examples of ways in which anxiety can present itself

Excessive fatigue, repeated illness, withdrawal from social life, changes in behaviour.

Phobias: Fear of heights, of falling, claustrophobia, fear of specific environments (e.g. supermarkets, crowded places), fear of driving or flying, or any other irrational or unusual fear.

Compulsions: Nail biting, nose picking, ticks, hair pulling etc.

Pain: Persistent or recurrent pain without an organic basis e.g. migraine type headaches.

Addictions: Excessive eating, smoking etc.

Social problems: anger outbursts, adjustment problems, relationship dysfunctions, poor scholastic performance etc.

## Unhelpful thoughts

In most of these examples, a professional therapist will be able to track down and identify a pattern of unintentional, unhelpful thoughts which invariably lead to increased anxiety.

## Professional help

It is not necessary to live with these consequences of anxiety for the rest of your life.

A professional can facilitate your progress through therapy by helping your subconscious mind to:

- reassign meaning to the driving force behind the anxiety,
- integrate the thinking and instinctive anxiety responses,
- break free of the anxiety cycle and unhelpful thoughts,
- and maintain helpful thought processes to prevent you from falling back into the same anxiety cycle.