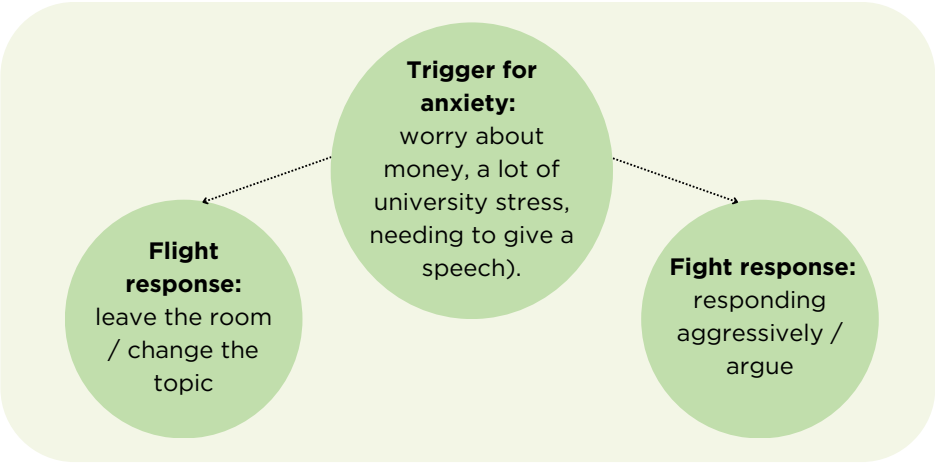
ANXIETY

What is anxiety?
Anxiety is part of life. If you had no anxiety, you would be comatose. In response to 'danger' or a 'threat', your anxiety rises to deal with the situation – either through running away ('flight') or staying to take on the situation ('fight').



This is a bit like driving a car up a steep hill - you need to change the gear up and rev the engine. However, when threat is over, you can change the gear down and slow the engine. If the engine continues going too fast, it could blow up. In daily life, you can control your body's engine by controlling your breathing and your thinking.

Some anxiety is a good thing. However, too much anxiety is not a good thing, especially when it becomes debilitating and impacts on daily life. It can present in a few different forms:

General anxiety disorder: When a person has frequent feelings or worry and fear, which are intense and out of proportion.[i]

Panic disorder: When people have frequent and unexpected panic attacks. Importantly, not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop a panic disorder.[ii]

Phobias: A phobia is a strong but unrealistic fear of something, typically a person, object, animal, or situation. If the person encounters the trigger for their phobia, it can cause them intense anxiety and distress.[iii]

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Symptoms

General anxiety produces feelings of fear and a constant sense of being overwhelmed. Its central theme is ongoing and excessive worry about everyday things, which is difficult to control.[i]

With a panic attack, there are a number of intense physical symptoms. You are likely to breath more quickly and deeply than normal, which reduces the amount of cardon dioxide in your lungs and therefore creates a lot of unpleasant feelings in the body.

These feelings can include:

- A tight or painful chest
- Sweating
- Palpitations
- Heart racing
- Dizziness
- Difficulty thinking or concentrating
- Weak legs
- Feeling faint, shaky or sick.

Panic attacks are compounded by the fact that they often trigger frightening thoughts, especially if the person doesn't know what is happening. It's easy to think you're having a heart attack or dying, which increases the feelings of panic and creates a vicious circle where the symptoms are intensified even more.

What can impact anxiety?

Excessive use of caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, colas, etc.) can cause anxiety, agitation, and restlessness. There is also evidence to suggest that smoking increases anxiety symptoms and disorders.[i]

Ways to manage and treat anxiety

Lifestyle changes can help alleviate anxiety symptoms, such as exercising regularly and practicing deep breathing or meditation. To address the root cause of an anxiety disorder, consider psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy.[ii]

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For panic attacks, there are two ways to break to vicious circle: through controlling your breathing and through changing your thoughts.

When you start to feel symptoms of panic, try **breathing in and out *slowly and evenly***, and avoid taking any sudden deep breaths.

Notice the **thoughts** you are having and remind yourself that what is happening is frightening but ***harmless***. Controlling panic takes practice, but keep going and it's possible to learn to manage it.

Like general anxiety, phobias can be treated through **CBT**, particularly through ***desensitisation therapy or exposure therapy***. This gradually exposes you to the trigger in controlled circumstances, along with strategies to help deal with the symptoms of panic.[iii]

References

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