

Understanding  
**Anxiety  
& Panic Attacks**

Dr Kwame McKenzie

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### IMPORTANT

This book is intended not as a substitute for personal medical advice but as a supplement to that advice for the patient who wishes to understand more about his or her condition.

Before taking any form of treatment  
**YOU SHOULD ALWAYS CONSULT YOUR MEDICAL  
PRACTITIONER.**

In particular (without limit) you should note that advances in medical science occur rapidly and some information about drugs and treatment contained in this booklet may very soon be out of date.

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# About the author

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# Introduction

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## What is anxiety?

It is almost impossible to live without anxiety or fear. It is widespread. We feel anxious regularly, although for each of us different events, situations or relationships will make us feel anxious. Lots of things make us anxious or fearful, from everyday events such as crossing the road or meeting new people to bigger decisions such as which school our children should go to or whether or not we should visit the doctor because we develop a pain. Anxiety affects everybody at times.

## Anxiety and fear

There is a subtle difference between anxiety and fear. Fear is the feeling that you have when you see or experience something that frightens you. Anxiety can be regarded as a type of fear that you experience when you are thinking or worrying about something rather than actually experiencing it.

I may fear for my life if a car speeds towards me when I am in the middle of the road but if I am sitting in my house, thinking about and becoming concerned

about safety on the roads, I could be described as being anxious about it. Anxiety and fear lead to similar feelings in the body.

Fear is an important defence mechanism that has always been with us. People who do not feel fear can be dangerous to themselves and it can be dangerous to be with them.

Some scientists believe that fear has an evolutionary basis. There are some objects that we are programmed to be scared of. These basic fears include certain animals such as snakes and spiders. As we were evolving, individuals with well-honed fear responses to these animals would have been more likely to survive and they would have been more likely to have had children and passed their genes on to the next generation. It takes millions of years for evolution to catch up and so some of our current fears may be linked to survival mechanisms from a long time ago.

Fear is both physical and psychological. Situations that provoke fear cause a release of hormones and chemicals that change our body functions. These responses were set up for past times when life was less sophisticated and our challenges were more obvious. The hormones and chemicals cause changes in the body that keep us alert, make us steel ourselves perhaps to fight or prepare us to run away.

We saw a predator, we recognised that it could be a danger to us and so we needed to prepare ourselves to fight it or to run away. Alternatively, we saw a possible source of food, perhaps a gazelle, which we did not want to miss the chance of catching because we needed to eat. We needed to think quickly, we needed to be ready to run and catch it, we needed to change our body state so that our performance was optimal.

Catching prey or fighting for our lives requires only short-lived changes in our body physiology. After we have escaped or after the kill there is no need for our bodies to burn excess energy and so it returns to normal.

Our fear responses work well for these sorts of short-lived situations. Our bodies at this time are focused on one thing that is more important than anything else we need to do. When the problem has passed we return to normal and continue with everyday life.

Our fear response is set up to deal with severe short-lived physical problems with which our bodies need to deal.

### **Fear and anxiety in the modern world**

The world has changed, however. Our worries and anxieties now are often not about physical threats or short-term problems. For instance, they may be about the future and how we are going to cope with problems or about situations that may arise but have not yet done so. Anxiety comes from the Latin *anxius*, which means to worry about an uncertain event.

Our bodies use the same set of responses for anxiety as they use for fear. The problem is that our fear response is built to deal with sudden obvious danger but it does not work well for uncertain events. It does not know when best to switch on or turn off. If our fear response is maintained for too long, we feel panicky and uncomfortable. We find it difficult to continue with our day-to-day lives.

We are set up to deal with short-lived physical challenges but the threats we come across are often diffuse, may last some time and are psychological rather than physical. The threats are not in front of us. They are often situations that we cannot necessarily

control. You cannot run away from rising debts, for example. It is impossible to fight job uncertainty physically. Nevertheless, these situations are important threats to our way of life.

We are left with a prehistoric defence mechanism in the twenty-first century. Our bodies are built to deal with short-lived fears, but our world produces longer-term worries.

The two are not a good match and, not surprisingly, the mismatch makes us prone to anxiety problems. The fact that more people do not suffer from such problems is the result of the fact that humans have an amazing ability to adapt. We all find ways of dealing with the stresses of our complex lives, but stresses and coping are finely balanced.

This book should help you to understand anxiety problems. You can think of an anxiety problem as fear or anxiety that either lasts too long or is too great compared with the threat. As a result, it causes problems in everyday life.

Challenging or threatening situations produce anxiety and sometimes fear. This is a normal reaction that is vital for survival.

But if the fear or anxiety is severe, persistent or out of proportion to the threat, or if it impairs your everyday life and your work, you probably have an anxiety disorder.

The good news is that anxiety disorders can usually be treated effectively, often without medication.

This book helps you understand what is happening to you and what treatments are on offer. It is not a therapy book that you can use by itself, but it will be a useful reference before and during the treatment that you receive from your GP, therapist or specialist.

## KEY POINTS

- It is almost impossible to live without anxiety or fear
- Anxiety can be regarded as a type of fear that you experience when you are thinking or worrying about something rather than actually experiencing it
- Our bodies are built to deal with short-lived fears, but our world produces longer-term worries
- An anxiety problem is a fear or anxiety that either lasts too long or is out of proportion compared with the threat
- Anxiety disorders can usually be treated effectively, often without medication

# Causes of anxiety and fear

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## What causes anxiety and fear?

Anxiety and fear are often caused by stress. Anxiety and fear are the feelings that we experience when we are cornered and we feel threatened. However, we do not always know exactly why we feel threatened.

We all have minor fears. We are taught some of them; others seem to be innate (instinctive). Babies start off being happy to be held by anyone, but after a few months they become afraid of strangers and often cry if they are picked up by people who are unfamiliar to them. You can understand how this could work to their benefit. Childbirth used to be dangerous and mothers often died. A baby who was not happy to be picked up by any adult soon after birth would find it difficult to attract someone to look after him or her if the mother died or was sick. However, after a few months of being well looked after, it would be important to stay with and be protected by the person who was familiar and trusted. Strangers would be a threat to the baby's existence and because of this they call out when strangers come near them.

Other fears also seem to be genetic, such as our fears of animals that scurry about, or fears of snakes or of heights. We can all think of plausible explanations why we may be scared of them, for instance, they may pass on germs that could kill us, they could bite us, or we may fear falling and hurting ourselves.

Some facts, however, just do not fit. There are very few people who are afraid of cars – although they are one of the most important causes of accidents in the UK. And there are lots of people who are afraid of flying in planes, although they are very safe indeed. This is what makes people think that we are predisposed to fearing some situations but not others.

## Anxiety and performance

It is normal to be fearful. A little fear is good for us. A little bit of anxiety sharpens up our game. It puts us a bit on edge and improves our performance. A little bit of fear helps us to think quickly, and it makes us work better physically. Students who are not anxious do less well in exams and people who are not appropriately anxious in interviews do not do as well. In extreme situations, those who are fearful think and act quicker and so are more likely to survive than those who are fearless. Fear responses have their place.

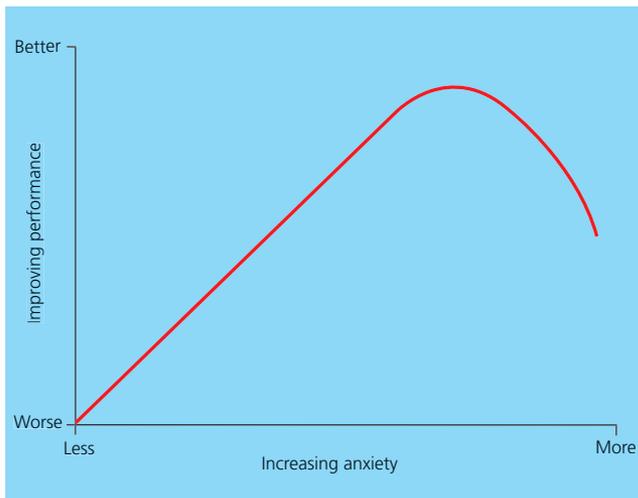
However, extreme fear and anxiety are not at all good for us. They impede our performance. Some people become so worried before public speaking that they sweat and stutter over their lines. Some students become so anxious over their exams that they cannot prepare properly for them; every time they sit down they worry about how they will do. Some people do badly in interviews because they are too nervous and some people become so fearful in extreme situations that they totally freeze.

There is a trade-off between a person's level of anxiety and his or her performance. Mental and physical performance increases as the level of anxiety increases but gradually reaches a point where for every increase in level of anxiety performance decreases – and decreases quickly. We all need some fear, but too much and we just cannot perform.

If you are too relaxed you may not perform well. If you are over-anxious or over-stressed your performance deteriorates.

### Anxiety can cause further anxiety

There is a further problem: anxiety and stress can produce a vicious circle. For instance, exam students who have become too anxious and cannot revise because they are worrying about how well they are going to do may soon realise that they have not been working.



Anxiety and performance.

This will make them more worried and produce more anxiety and more time wasted about how they are going to fare. The more they worry, the less time they spend working and the more they worry.

There are other forms of anxiety that are not helpful. Later in the book forms of anxiety are described that seem to have no reason and are unrelated to any event. In addition fears and anxieties are described that are extreme compared with the threat. These forms of anxiety have no useful function at all and can be distressing.

Sometimes the timing of our anxiety goes awry. During a traumatic event some people seem to cope very well but hours or even days later their anxiety kicks in. This sort of delayed fear and anxiety response is, again, very distressing and not useful.

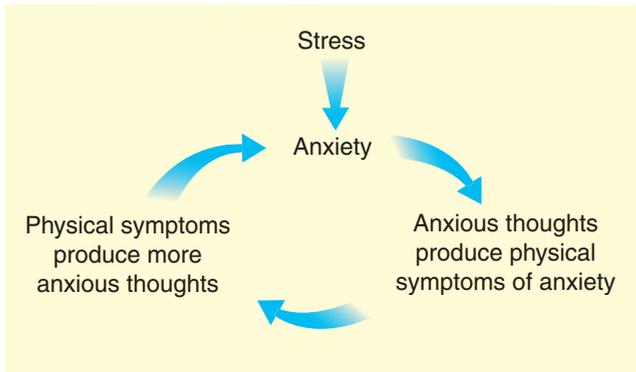
### How common are anxiety problems?

Anxiety is an everyday event for many people. Anxiety that causes problems with our enjoyment of life affects a lot of people. It is estimated that 14 per cent of the population (14 in every 100) have a problem that could benefit from treatment. Anxiety problems are very common and they are the most common psychological problem in the UK. They are more common than depression. Anxiety can become an escalating vicious circle, whereby the existence of anxiety produces other effects in the body, such as physical symptoms, that cause even more anxiety.

### Does my anxiety need treatment?

The simple answer is that, if your anxiety affects the way in which you live and if it affects your enjoyment of life, you may benefit from treatment. But, beware,

## Anxiety can become a vicious circle



the drive that some people have to succeed is based on their anxieties about themselves. So, if you were to try to get rid of anxiety altogether, you could feel more relaxed but you could diminish your drive to succeed.

### How common is anxiety?

Type of anxiety	Percentage of adults (aged 16–64) with anxiety problems	
Mixed anxiety and depression	8 per cent	(8 in 100)
Generalised anxiety	3 per cent	(2 in 100)
Obsessive–compulsive	1 per cent	(1 in 100)
Panic disorder	1 per cent	(1 in 100)
Phobias	1 per cent	(1 in 100)
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 per cent</b>	<b>(14 in 100)</b>

### KEY POINTS

- Anxiety and fear are normal reactions that we need so that we can respond properly to threats
- Too much anxiety stops us performing properly
- Anxiety disorders are the result of too much or inappropriate anxiety
- Fourteen per cent of the population at some time suffer from anxiety problems that could be treated
- If your anxiety affects the way that you live your life, consider getting treatment

# Symptoms of anxiety

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## The fight, flight or fright response

Our fear response is set up for dealing with a physical threat or opportunity. Some people call it a fight, flight or fright response because those seem to be the options that our body is giving us – we freeze, fight our foe or run away.

Our body gets ready for action in a number of ways. A number of hormones are released into our bloodstream from the glands in which they are stored. They have effects on our nerves and other organs, preparing us for action.

The chief hormone is adrenaline (also known as epinephrine). It causes our heart to beat quicker, makes our blood pressure go up and gets us to breathe quicker. These actions make sure that we have lots of blood full of oxygen so that the muscles can work effectively.

Adrenaline helps to make sure that our body uses this blood efficiently. It makes some blood vessels bigger and others smaller, and in this way causes blood to be diverted to the parts of the body that most need it.

The muscles in our legs and arms are needed for fighting or running away and so they receive preferential treatment. The brain is provided with extra blood so that we stay alert and can think about what we need to do. Less important functions, such as digesting food, are put on the back burner, so blood to the stomach is decreased. Blood to the skin is also decreased.

If we need to run, however, we need to run fast. Hence we need to be as light as we can. Adrenaline affects the muscles in our bladder and bowel. Being as light as we can be could be the difference between getting away and being caught. Adrenaline makes us feel like urinating and defecating so that we can get rid of excess water and solids.

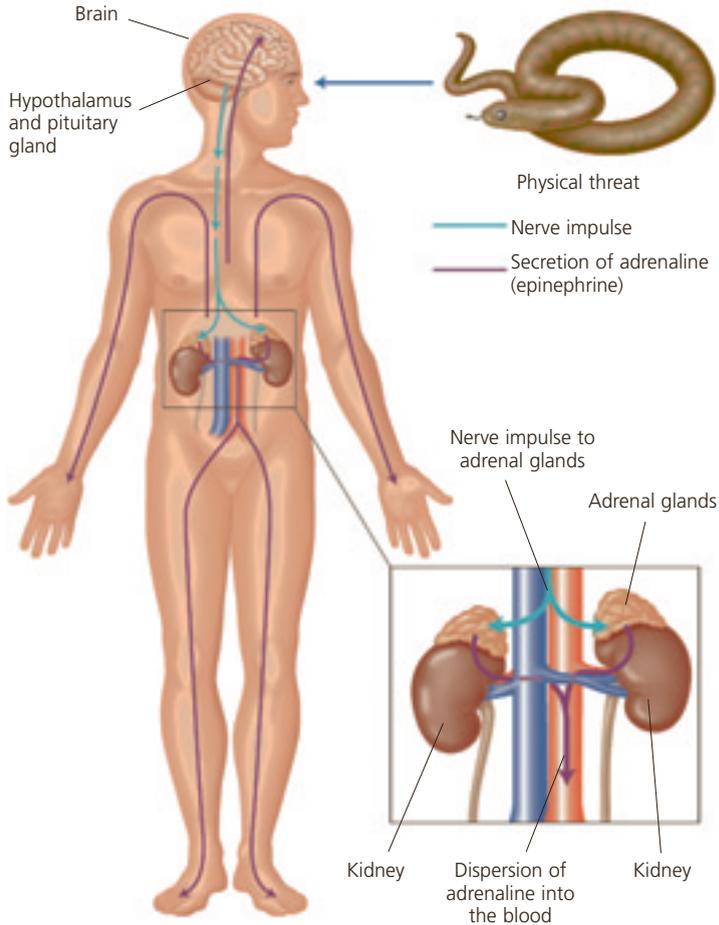
If we are running and using extra energy we do not want to overheat. Hence our bodies sweat. The water cools us off. Adrenaline also gives our sensory organs a pep up. We become tense so that everything can act and react more quickly.

These bodily changes correspond to the symptoms that we feel when we are anxious, for instance:

- We feel our heart pounding or feel like we have palpitations because adrenaline has pushed our heart rate up.
- We feel dizzy because adrenaline has changed our blood pressure.
- We may feel a little short of breath because we are breathing faster.
- We get butterflies in the stomach because the blood is diverted from here and we may feel like going to the toilet because the muscles to the bladder are affected.

## Adrenaline and the fear response

Adrenaline is released in the body in response to a physical threat or opportunity. It has a variety of effects within the body to ensure that we are ready to deal with the situation.



## What are the symptoms of anxiety?

There are many symptoms of anxiety. They can be broadly categorised as either physical or psychological.

### Physical

- Palpitations
- Sweating
- Tremor
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty breathing
- Choking
- Chest tightness
- Abdominal pain/discomfort/nausea
- Hot flushes
- Tingling in fingers

### Psychological

- Dizziness
- Fear of losing control
- Fear of dying
- Feeling out of it
- Loss of appetite
- Poor sleep
- Tiredness
- Feeling on edge
- Restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Depression

- We sweat; this happens in order to cool us down but at the same time we may feel cold because adrenaline has caused the blood to drain away from the skin.
- We feel on edge and tense because all our senses and muscles have been pepped up.

None of these symptoms will cause a problem to us. The body has it all under control. We do not even notice them when we experience them in the appropriate situation – a threatening situation. We do notice them, however, if we experience them when we are not