

# Anxiety 101

## What is anxiety?

### What exactly is anxiety?

Anxiety is our body's reaction to perceived danger or important events. Anxiety is like an internal alarm system. It alerts us to danger and helps our body prepare to deal with it. For example, it allows us to jump out of the way of a speeding car. It also helps us to perform at our best, like when you are studying for that final exam. Anxiety is something that everyone experiences from time to time.

### What's going on when I'm anxious?

When we're anxious it affects our thoughts, body, and behaviours. When faced with real danger, you will have worrisome thoughts focused on the danger, your body will rev up to help you deal with the danger, and you will take action either to get away from or fight the danger. So, anxiety protects you – it's how we've evolved and stayed alive as a species. Without anxiety we would be extinct!

For example, imagine that you're out walking your dog, and a skunk pops out of the bushes. You will have thoughts about the skunk such as, "What if it sprays us?" Your body will also react (pupils dilate, heart beats faster, muscles tense up) and you'll probably try to run away.

**BODY REACTIONS:**  
pupils dilate, heart  
beats faster,  
muscles tense up



**THOUGHTS:**  
"What if it  
sprays us?"

**BEHAVIOURS:**  
Run away

## *I've heard about something called "fight-flight-freeze" – what is that?*

Anxiety triggers something called the "fight-flight-freeze" response. This automatic response helps you cope with danger. For example, you may yell at your mom for pushing you to take your driving test when you don't feel ready (**fight**). You may avoid going to a party or leave early because you feel uncomfortable around people you don't know (**flight**). Or, you may **freeze** and hope the danger doesn't notice you, like when your mind goes blank when the teacher asks you a question.

This fight-flight-freeze thing is pretty cool. It's like having superhero powers that you can activate when you need to protect yourself.

In order to keep you safe, your body gets revved up to deal with danger. Check out the cool ways your body changes to protect you from danger.

**HEART** - When your body is preparing itself for action, it makes sure blood and oxygen is pumped to major muscles like your biceps or thighs. This gives you energy and power to strike out at danger or to run away as fast as you can.

**THIGH MUSCLES** - When faced with danger, your body tenses up, so you are ready to spring into action. The muscles in your legs tense up so you can run away, fight back by kicking, or hold still.

**ARM MUSCLES** - When faced with danger, your body tenses up, so you are ready to spring into action. The muscles in your arms tense up so you can strike out at danger, pull yourself away, or hold still.

**FINGERS** - When you are faced with danger, blood from your fingers starts to move towards bigger muscles, like your biceps. These bigger muscles need energy to help you fight or run. Your fingers may feel numb, cold, or tingly as blood moves away from them.

**SWEAT GLANDS** - Your body works hard to help you get ready for danger. It takes a lot of energy, which can cause your body to heat up. Sweat from your underarms, palms, or forehead cools down your body.

# Anxiety 101



**HEAD** - When you breathe too fast or too deep, you may feel a little lightheaded. This is called hyperventilating. Don't worry. It's not dangerous! Your body is just trying to get more oxygen and blood to your large muscles so you can fight, run, or hold still.

**STOMACH** - When your body thinks you are in danger, it puts all its resources into protecting you. Other systems in your body (like your digestive system) slow down, because your body thinks giving you energy to deal with the danger is more important than digesting that sandwich you had for lunch. Of course, this means you might get an upset or sore stomach from that sandwich sitting in stomach acid while it waits to be digested once the danger passes.

**TOES** - When you are faced with danger, blood from your toes starts to move towards bigger muscles like your thighs. This is because those bigger muscles need energy to help you fight, run, or freeze. Your toes may feel numb, cold, or tingly as blood moves away from them.

**EYES** - When you are confronted with danger, your pupils get bigger to let in more light so you can better spot the danger. This can make things seem brighter or fuzzier, and you may even see some black spots or other visual effects.

All of these changes are normal. Although sometimes they can feel really uncomfortable, they are **NOT** dangerous. Nobody has ever become very sick or died from anxiety alone. Remember, anxiety always goes away eventually - even if you don't do anything.

## When does anxiety become a problem?

***Okay, I get it. Everyone gets anxiety sometimes. But when does it become a problem?***

Anxiety can become a problem when ...

- 1) Anxiety goes off when there is no **real** danger (such as a smoke alarm going off when you're just making toast).
- 2) Anxiety happens a lot.
- 3) Anxiety feels pretty intense.
- 4) Anxiety stops you from doing fun and important things that you want to do (like going to school dances or parties, making friends or dating, getting your homework done, or getting a job or your driver's licence).

## Where does anxiety come from?

### *Why do I have a problem with anxiety, but my best friend doesn't?*

Anxiety problems can develop a couple of different ways: genetics and life experiences.

#### **1. Genetics**

Anxiety problems can be passed on genetically. If someone in your immediate or extended family, like your mom, dad, grandma, or uncle, has had problems with anxiety, then you might be more likely to develop an anxiety problem. Your best friend may not have had family members with anxiety problems.

#### **2. Life Experience:**

Certain life events or experiences can make us more likely to develop problems with anxiety.

For example, getting teased or bullied when you're younger can make you more uncomfortable talking to new people when you're older. Having a bad experience at the dentist can make you more likely to fear going to the dentist in the future.

Things at home may not be so great. Mom and Dad might be fighting a lot. They might be very critical of you or put a lot of pressure on you to do well at school.

Sometimes we may witness things that make us anxious. For example, seeing someone almost drown might make you super scared of water.

Sometimes, if a parent struggles with anxiety we end up learning anxious behaviours from them. For example, maybe your dad seemed anxious talking to unfamiliar people and didn't invite people over to your house. As a result, you might have learned to be more anxious in social situations.

A parent who warned you about the possible dangers in the world may have made you feel like the world is a really scary place and that there is lots to worry about.

The reason you have anxiety problems and your best friend doesn't may be because you haven't had the same experiences.



# Anxiety 101

## ***What can I do about anxiety?***



Lots!

- Learn how to relax or chill out.
- Learn ways to “dial down” your worries.
- Face your fears.
- Take care of yourself.