

'Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood'

– Madame Curie –

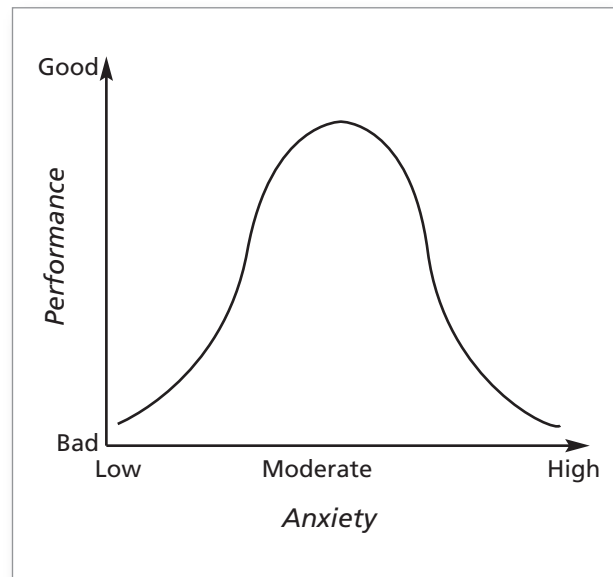
■ Types of anxiety problem

Tension and anxiety are common problems. About one tenth of the population every year will see their doctor because they feel tense or anxious. In the past doctors have traditionally prescribed drugs for such problems, but over the last few years research has shown that there are more effective ways of treating anxiety. This new approach involves teaching people how to cope, and these methods are similar to learning a new skill such as riding a bicycle or learning to play the piano.

These approaches can help a variety of people whose problems on the surface may take a different form, but who underneath suffer the same unpleasant feelings. Examples include the housebound person who is terrified of going out; the person who is afraid of spiders, lifts, aeroplanes, or small spaces (these problems are called phobias); the person who experiences panic attacks; the person who obsessively checks things such as all the electrical appliances or compulsively washes their hands. Lastly, there may be people who feel generally anxious and who cannot tie their feelings down to anything specific.

■ Anxiety is a normal reaction

Anxiety is a normal healthy reaction. It happens to everyone at times of danger or in worrying situations. There is a perception of threat or danger to either your physical or psychological well being. When you are anxious your bodily system speeds up. In certain circumstances this can be a definite advantage. It means that you are ready for action and enables you to respond quickly if necessary. Moderate amounts of anxiety actually improve your performance, spurring you on to greater achievements.



The graph above – known as the Yerkes-Dodson curve – demonstrates this point. People were given a task which involved remembering some numbers. But as they did this they were made anxious, some a little, some a lot, some in between. As the graph shows, when the anxiety was low or high the people did not perform well, but when their anxiety was moderate they did best.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it interferes with our performance or our everyday lives. This is when it becomes necessary to learn how to control it. Remember that anxiety is a normal healthy reaction. You cannot banish it completely from your life but you can learn to manage it.

■ Anxiety and your body

When we feel anxious a chain of automatic events occurs in our bodies, which prepares us for action. This reaction is often termed the ‘fight or flight’ response and can be traced back into our evolutionary past. Imagine the primitive caveman threatened by a wild animal. He needs to be prepared for vigorous action: either to run or to fight. We still possess this survival reaction, although it is now triggered by more subtle situations – some of which we are not even consciously aware of.

The reaction itself consists of the brain sending a message to pump adrenalin into the bloodstream and into the large skeletal muscles of the arms and legs. The heart beats faster as it is working harder. Because it is working harder, it needs more fuel so we breathe in more oxygen. To cool down the body, sweat and blood capillaries come to the surface. The body ideally needs to be as light as possible so a visit to the toilet might be necessary. When this chain of events occurs in a normal situation, for example if we are pushing a trolley around a supermarket or sitting in a business meeting, it can be very frightening. The important thing to remember is that the physical symptoms are natural and not harmful, but are appearing in an inappropriate situation.

■ The three systems of anxiety

Anxiety is often referred to as if it is a single phenomenon, but this is not the case. There are three parts to the feeling of anxiety:

- ① **Bodily sensations:** These have already been mentioned – they include irregular breathing, churning stomach, sweating, trembling, racing heart and the need to visit the toilet.
- ② **Behaviour:** This means the way you behave – that is what you do when faced with the situation you fear. Especially important is the behaviour of avoiding the situation, either not going into the situation, or getting out of it as quickly as possible.

- ③ **Thinking:** This includes your ideas and beliefs, your mental comments to yourself, or your mental pictures about what might happen to you in the situation you fear.

Looking at these parts separately, and learning new skills in each area, is an important part of anxiety management.

■ Anxiety and confidence

Anxiety reduces confidence because it makes it hard to do the things that were once easy. We normally feel confident when we do things well and lose confidence when we fail or avoid situations. It is easy to get into a vicious circle when, because we feel less confidence we avoid a situation, and because we avoid, we feel less confident. Confidence can be regained by learning how to cope better and gradually building up to take on bigger tasks.

■ Why do anxiety symptoms begin?

There is usually a combination of causes. Two of the important ones are:

- ① **The amount of stress you are under:** You may have a single major problem, or more likely a number of smaller problems which all add up to a large amount of stress. Stress can be measured to some extent by the amount of changes that have taken place in your life recently. Being physically tired, run down and having many changes or traumas makes you more vulnerable to anxiety.
- ② **The kind of person you are:** Some people have a more sensitive emotional nervous system. Their bodies' arousal response might be triggered more quickly and take a longer time to calm down. Some people have learned from their parents in their early experiences how to get anxious and how to worry.

■ What maintains anxiety?

Why does anxiety stay with you? What keeps it going? Basically, there seem to be two reasons:

- ① Because of the way you behave, especially because you *avoid* the situations you fear.
- ② Because of *beliefs* you have about the situation and its consequences.

Let us look at some examples:

'Lift phobic' people never go in a lift because they may believe it will fall to the bottom of the lift shaft; 'agoraphobics' never go out because they may believe they will collapse and die of a heart attack; some people may avoid meeting others because they believe that in a disagreement, they will lose their temper and hit people; some people obsessively check the locks on the doors and windows over and over before going to bed because they are certain that burglars will break in.

These examples make clear two things:

- ① Thoughts and beliefs can become distorted and exaggerated (and the person may realise that it is just that) about what will happen in the feared situation. Anticipating something bad is going to happen can create a vicious circle of anxiety.
- ② There is often direct avoidance of the feared situation. There may also be a network of 'safety behaviours', such as, always carrying a tranquilliser 'just in case', or always carrying a plastic bag in case of being sick, or always sitting close to the door. All these avoidance behaviours prevent you from truly realising that you can cope with anxiety and that the dangers are not real. Your irrational beliefs continue because they are never proved wrong.

■ Common myths about anxiety

As anxiety symptoms often occur without any obvious explanation, people often misinterpret them and think there is a more serious problem.

- ① **I'm going crazy:** There is no link between panic anxiety and more serious psychiatric illness.
- ② **I'm going to lose control:** There has never been a recorded case of anybody doing anything 'wild', or 'out of control' or against their wishes.
- ③ **I'm having a heart attack:** Although the major symptoms of heart disease include breathlessness and chest pain, the symptoms are generally related to effort and will go away quickly with rest.
- ④ **This anxiety will harm me:** Anxiety does not harm you physically, although it is unpleasant and uncomfortable.
- ⑤ **I'm going to faint:** Very unlikely as your heart rate goes up. You only faint if your heart rate and blood pressure drop.

The Body's Arousal Reaction

Physical Reaction: The mind becomes focused and preoccupied with the thought 'what is the danger and how can I get to safety?'

Symptom: Panic, preoccupation.

Physical Reaction: The brain sends a biochemical message to the pituitary gland, which releases a hormone which triggers the adrenal gland to release adrenalin.

Symptom: Headaches, dizziness.

Physical Reaction: Pupils dilate.

Symptom: Blurred vision.

Physical Reaction: Mouth becomes dry.

Symptom: Difficulty swallowing.

Physical Reaction: Neck and shoulder muscles tense – large skeletal muscles contract ready for action.

Symptom: Aching neck, backache, headache.

Physical Reaction: Breathing becomes faster and shallower, supplying more oxygen to muscles.

Symptoms: Overbreathing, chest pains, tingling, palpitations, asthma.

Physical Reaction: Heart pumps faster and blood pressure rises.

Symptoms: High blood pressure.

Physical Reaction: Liver releases stored sugar to provide fuel for quick energy.

Symptoms: Excess sugar in blood, indigestion.

Physical Reaction: Adrenalin and noradrenalin are released.

Physical Reaction: Digestion slows down or ceases as blood is diverted away from the stomach.

Symptoms: Nausea, indigestion, ulcers.

Physical Reaction: Muscles at opening of anus and bladder are relaxed.

Symptoms: Frequent urination, diarrhoea.

Physical Reaction: The body cools itself by perspiring: blood vessels and capillaries move close to skin surface.

Symptoms: Excess sweating, blushing.



'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself'

– Franklin D Roosevelt –

The thoughts we have play a major part in increasing or decreasing our anxiety.

Two examples may make it clearer how thoughts can add to anxiety and lead to it getting out of control.

Mrs Brown was alarmed to find herself feeling dizzy while waiting at a bus stop. Then she noticed her heart was pounding and her legs felt as if they were giving way. Because the symptoms came out of the blue, she was terrified that she was about to collapse, or even die, and she continued to feel frightened until safely home. After that, just thinking about going out made her feel nervous, and sometimes brought the dizzy feeling back.

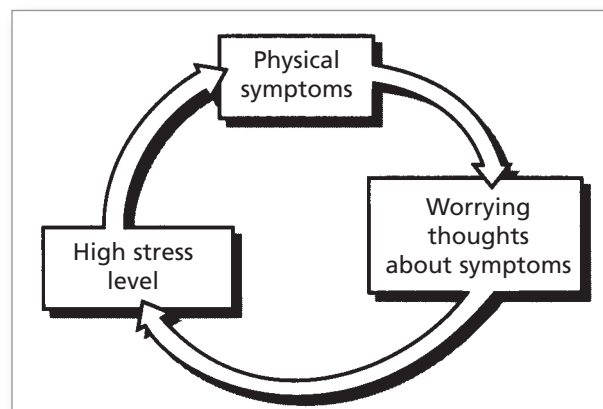
Mr Jones noticed that he felt very tense and irritable when there was a lot of work to be done, and it took him a long time to unwind afterwards. He went to his doctor after starting to get headaches every evening, and although the doctor could not find anything wrong, the patient started to worry that some disease might have been missed. This worry made it even more difficult for him to relax after work.

Although these problems seem quite different, both were caused by a combination of worry and physical tension. Because the feelings did not seem to make any sense, both people started to worry about them, although this only made things worse. They both began to become anxious about being anxious, or to worry more about symptoms than the background stress that originally caused those symptoms.

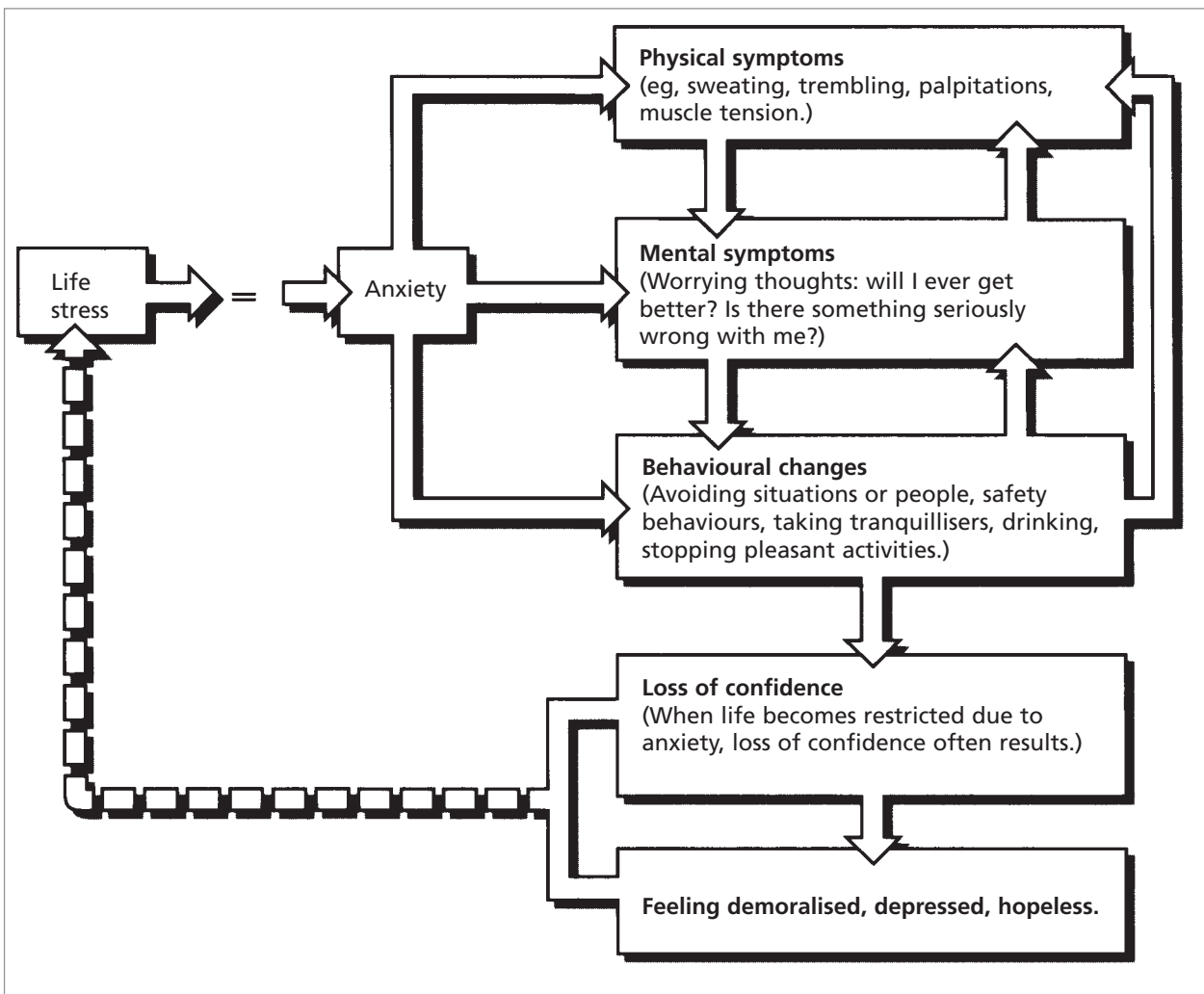
Research suggests that many people who suffer from anxiety make matters worse for themselves by misinterpreting these physical symptoms. Common misinterpretations include: 'I'm going to have a heart attack', 'I'm going to die', 'I'm going

to go completely out of control', 'I'm going to embarrass myself terribly', and 'I am damaging my health'. All these thoughts are very frightening and tend to keep the physical anxiety well stocked up. It must be remembered that these thoughts are also inaccurate distortions of what is actually happening.

The vicious circle of worrying thoughts and physical symptoms is illustrated below:



Sometimes we are not fully aware that these frightening thoughts are flashing through our mind. They occur very quickly and often just below the level of consciousness. It is important to try and identify these thoughts and recognise the role they play in creating and maintaining anxiety.



■ **What can I do to get better?**

- ① Understand the process and how anxiety persists because of a spiralling vicious circle between physical symptoms, worrying thoughts and changes in behaviour.
- ② Break into this vicious circle by learning new skills:
 - a *Physical symptoms* can be reduced by learning relaxation or controlled breathing.
 - b *Mental symptoms* ie, worry, can be combated by a combination of identifying and challenging worrying thoughts and replacing them with positive ones, and/or distracting yourself.
 - c *Behavioural changes* can be altered by deliberately changing your behaviour and going back into difficult situations in a gradual step-by-step fashion.

- ③ Make alterations to your lifestyle and so manage successfully the amount of stress you put yourself under. This might involve learning to be more assertive, managing your time better, breaking unhelpful habits or learning other new skills.