

Anxiety

Most of us have felt worried at some time in our lives – maybe we have an exam to sit or an important interview or some sort of health worry. Usually it passes. We need a shot of anxiety occasionally to mobilise us – to make us go to the doctor or prepare for that exam or interview. So far, so healthy. This is normal and to be accepted. It's helpful – so if we feel a bit churned up before an exam – butterflies in our stomach or a bit wobbly – we can welcome this as something we need. Adrenalin and Cortisol are active in our bodies, to help us to step up to the situation – blood is being re-directed to crucial parts of our bodies. It's actually the same biological reaction as excitement – you probably feel the same on a roller coaster or when you see someone you are attracted to – but you interpret this as excitement rather than anxiety.

Anxiety is only bad when we get stuck in the worry loop. This is called Disordered Anxiety. We get bound up in the 'what ifs?' about the future (What if I fail? What if I don't get the job? What if I've got cancer?) and the 'if onlys'. (If only I'd revised more! If only I didn't have so many bills to pay! If only I'd never started smoking!) It goes on and on and we can manage to convince ourselves that we are complete failures, who will never get a job, never get a partner, end up in the gutter and die an early death! We can end up stopping doing things that are perfectly normal and bearable because we get so anxious about being anxious! eg. We might stop attending parties because we have become socially anxious or avoiding dogs because one once bit us.

Notice what I said. 'We convince ourselves.' That is exactly what anxiety is. It is **us** convincing **ourselves** that something is wrong. Sometimes there **really is** something a bit wrong – we really do have a bad cough, we really did get bad grades – but we are the ones who convince ourselves that it is terminal cancer or we are now doomed to the scrap-heap!

In effect, what we've done, is taken our primitive warning system (the part of the brain called the limbic system) which can be jolly useful for reacting to genuine emergencies eg. running away from muggers (flight) or punching them back (fight) and given it the idea that it needs to be on high alert. We're sending it the message that there is a sabre-toothed tiger about to eat us, when there isn't! We've made it busy churning out adrenalin and/or cortisol, the hormones we need to deal with stress and danger, when there is no significant threat – and so we can end up feeling ill. For example, 'butterflies in the tummy' is caused by a reduction of blood flow to the stomach because it's needed in your heart, arms, legs and brain!

Here's a great video to explain this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG-Q>

Once we've got our limbic system in action, we can get into a vicious circle. Our bodies are generating all the necessities for fight or flight – faster breathing, raised heart-beat and blood pressure. Our brains then assume there **really is** something wrong – and more stress hormones are secreted which are bodies respond to....and so on!

Meanwhile, we're not actually running away or fighting the tiger, so we experience the side-effects (nausea, shaking, sweating) which we wouldn't even notice if we were busy dealing with an actual threat! We're now stuck in 'freeze', unable to do anything but hope the threat goes away, just as you might hope that if you stay still long enough, the tiger won't notice you.

So what do you do?

First, address the physical symptoms.

Find out what works for you. You're aiming to disperse the hormones that are making you feel bad and stimulate endorphins (the happiness hormones) instead.

1. Take some deep breaths. Make sure you are breathing deeply, from the diaphragm. You'll know you are doing this if you can see your tummy expanding so you look slightly pregnant! If your shoulders rise, you're not actually taking in much air. The ribs that can expand, thus letting your lungs fill, are the ones at the bottom of your chest, not the top.
2. Try breathing **in** for 7 and **out** for 11 at a steady pace. This way you'll reduce the oxygen concentration in your blood and your body will automatically lower the metabolic rate, which slows you down. You'll also have to concentrate which will help take you away from the anxious thoughts.
3. Jog – fast! On the spot will do.
4. Go outside and kick a football against the side of the house. Or bash a tennis ball. Or shoot some hoops. Or get on your skateboard. Imagine you are a superstar. OK, so it's dark and wet – so what? It'll add to the challenge. Would it bother Bear Grylls? No – so do it! It's got to be better than being screwed up with anxiety.
5. Put on some loud, lively music and dance or head-bang to it.
6. Yell! Imagine that tiger. Now make it more scared of you than you are of it!
7. Sing! Singing is an excellent stress-buster. It's very physical and is excellent for releasing endorphins. If you fancy doing some air guitar at the same time, that's all to the good. Think you can't sing? Go and do it in the shower – it'll sound better.
8. Juggle! It's really absorbing so takes your mind of things. Here's a nice, clear tutorial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk4-wLZMPno>
9. Or whistle. Can't whistle? Then start learning – that'll give you something different to concentrate on! Here's a great Youtube clip to get you started. It really works!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9LduAhQC6Y>

The other key is to address your thinking. You may need to distract yourself to prevent your thoughts from perpetuating the loop. So:

10. Distract yourself. Read something fun. Play a computer game. Watch a Youtube video, especially something funny. Force your limbic system to get off the case by showing it that nothing is wrong – I am perfectly safe watching a re-run of my favourite show, thank you very much!
11. Find someone to talk to. You can moan about your worries if you want, but don't start going over and over them. Be solution focused. If the person you talk to has suggestions, listen to them. Ban yourself from saying 'Yeh, but....' Keep the moaning time-limited – maybe ten minutes max. Ask this nice, kind person about what's going on for them instead!
12. If it's schoolwork or exam anxiety, do something that *you will thank yourself for later* and that *will calm you down right now*. Maybe you really do need to sort out your revision time-table or tidy up that heap of revision notes you call your filing system? Maybe you'll sleep better if you tidy your room and it doesn't feel like going to bed in a slum? (Fact: making your bed each day will actually make you feel better and work better! I'm not just saying that because I'm a mum!) Have a look at the article about Revision in the Well-being section.

See also my article on stress. Thinking in a stressful way will create anxiety – so it's important to address that stressful thinking.

Mindfulness Meditation is a great help with anxiety so it's well worth considering learning to do this, if this hasn't already been covered in PSHE. If it has and you haven't given it a thorough go, then now's the time, learning to live in a 'mindful' way – being present 'in the moment' and not living in the past or the future – the territory that the 'if onlys' and the 'what ifs' inhabit.

Here is a great website with some good mindfulness meditations:

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

There are some great apps for meditation of all sorts now. One that is particularly popular is Headspace.

<https://www.headspace.com/>

It's worth a look. For help with this, get in touch with me. There are other stabilisation techniques which is good to learn. Ask for our resource on those too.

Try things out! You are in charge of your own anxiety! So get started on taking control.

Meg Harper, Head of Counselling

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