

# Anxiety Symptoms

What's Happening



and Why

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# Anxiety Symptoms: What's Happening and Why

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## **Important**

The information in this book is not intended to be used for self-diagnosis nor to be taken as a substitute for good individual personal professional medical attention. The only intent of the author is to offer information to help you in your quest for well-being and no responsibility can be taken by the author or the publisher for the way this information is used.

It is strongly recommended that anyone who is thinking, feeling or behaving in a way that they don't understand, any way that is causing pain or unhappiness, should consult a medical professional and that a medical doctor should always be consulted for any persistent physical or bodily function problem, in the first instance, to rule out possible physical causes before psychological reasons are explored. And that, importantly, under no circumstances, should anybody stop taking prescribed medication without fully qualified medical supervision.

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## Introduction

This eBook is the first in a series of three, covering key areas that are extremely important for anyone trying to understand and deal with anxiety and the problems it can bring.

Anxiety symptoms – something that, for many of us, signal the start of a lengthy quest to find out what is happening to us and why.

Anxiety is frightening; it's meant to be, to protect us from danger. But when it strikes often, for no apparent reason, and we cannot control it, it's not surprising that we start to think, "What is wrong with me?"

A speeding heart, rapid breathing, feeling dizzy or sick, trembling and sweating – these well-recognised indicators of anxiety make us feel scared. And they're supposed to, in order to keep us away from danger.

However, they feel even worse when we cannot understand them or control them, so let's take a closer look at anxiety symptoms and what's really going on.

## **Anxiety Symptoms**

### **What Happens and Why**

IMAGINE YOU'RE LYING on a beach. It's a beautiful day, the sun is shining and there is a gentle breeze wafting over your body. Sounds of nature fill the air as you chat and laugh with family and friends. You are surrounded by people that you love and respect and they love and respect you. You feel lovely and warm, calm, contented and happy, totally relaxed, anxiety-free.

Now imagine a very different scene. It's the dead of night and you are walking alone down a dimly lit alley. There are doorways on either side – who knows what's hiding in them, waiting to pounce?

You are scared and all your senses are heightened. Your sight and hearing have become more sensitive, able to pinpoint the slightest movement or sound. Your breathing and heartbeat have become more rapid, you feel light-headed and dizzy and have an overwhelming desire to go to the toilet or throw up. Your limbs feel shaky and your whole body is now charged with energy, full of anxiety, ready to fight or flee, possibly for your life.

These two scenes represent either end of the anxiety scale. In the first we feel warm, secure and safe; we are fully relaxed. In the second we are really anxious, highly alert and scared. We are prepared for danger.

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Anxiety is a survival instinct that has evolved over millions of years in order to protect us from getting hurt. It is a series of reflexes and responses involving thoughts and feelings that affect our mind and body as we become prepared to avoid or deal with dangerous situations.

Every single person on the planet has anxiety. It's an essential part of human make up designed to keep us alive and it does this in two main ways:-

Firstly, it helps prepare our body for action, making us more alert, ready to fight or flee from any danger or threat to our survival. Often referred to as 'the fight-or-flight response'

this is responsible for the direct physical sensations (such as rapid heartbeat, fast breathing, being jittery and on-edge, trembling etc.) that we feel when we are anxious. In real, imminent danger we can go from being totally relaxed to extremely anxious in an instant, which is panic.

Initiated by the release of adrenaline from the adrenal gland the moment we perceive any danger, this fight-or-flight response explains most all of the physical anxiety and panic symptoms that we experience. In essence everything that is happening to our body is a result of it being physically prepared for action.

Much of this preparation involves the re-directing of resources to the major muscle groups (legs / arms / chest) to provide them with an energy boost for action and enable us, ultimately, to fight or flee:-

- Our *breathing becomes more rapid* to get more oxygen (fuel) for these muscles into the blood.
- Our *heartbeat speeds up* to get this freshly oxygenated blood to the muscles more quickly.
- Blood is diverted from the brain (making us *light-headed* and *dizzy*) and from the stomach (causing '*butterflies*').
- Energy cannot be wasted processing any half-digested food in our system so we need to get rid of it quickly – either through the mouth (*feelings of nausea*) or the other end (*wanting to go to the toilet*).
- Other 'energy-wasting' systems (unnecessary in time of danger) are shut down eg. saliva production, giving us a *dry mouth* and *difficulty swallowing*.
- We *sweat more* to cool down all this energy production.
- The energy boost to the muscles makes them feel '*jumpy*' / '*jittery*' / '*jelly-like*'/ '*on edge*' ready for action.
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- The energy boost to the muscles makes them '*jumpy*' / '*jittery*' / '*jelly-like*'/ *on edge* ready for action.

These physical symptoms of anxiety form the basis of problems such as general nervousness, social phobias (in fact, almost all types of phobia) and panic disorder.

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Secondly, anxiety causes us to plan ahead for any potential dangers and how we might deal with them. We also imagine any painful consequences. This is an excellent survival strategy (it's better to deal with a danger or avoid it before we get into the situation) but an unfortunate effect of this is that we can get nervous and anxious just thinking about certain situations.

A main ingredient in the cause of certain anxiety disorders, this function is related to symptoms such as persistent, uncontrollable negative thoughts and excessive worrying.

\* \* \*

The physical and mental aspects of anxiety affect us so strongly (“What is wrong with me?”) that it may be wise to examine them in more detail. Let’s look into them a little deeper to find out what is happening and why, and in doing so remove some of the mystery that surrounds them:-

## **Palpitations**

A speeding heart is one of the defining symptoms of anxiety. We cannot be anxious with a calm, slow-beating heart.

To most people, heart palpitations mean strong, fast heartbeats and a faster heart rate – something we can easily associate with anxiety and panic. However, heart palpitations also refer to missed or skipped beats.

For the most part, heart palpitations are harmless but it is very important to have any symptoms checked by a medical professional to rule out physical causes that may be serious.

Palpitations may be warning signs for heart disease, an over-active thyroid or due to certain prescription medications – problems that all require medical attention. And a doctor should be called immediately for palpitations that also involve chest pain, loss of consciousness or shortness of breath.

Non-serious heart palpitations often occur due to external things that we take such as caffeine, nicotine and illegal drugs or may result from vigorous exercise. These are a direct result of something we take or do, are usually less frequent and don't indicate anything is physically wrong.

Another category of palpitations, whilst not serious in the sense of indicating physical illness, generally occur more frequently, involve both speeding heart and missed beats and reflect an underlying problem that needs attention. These are the heart palpitations caused by anxiety and panic.

Every year in the United States and the United Kingdom tens of thousands of people visit hospital emergency wards fearing they are having a heart attack... only to discover they were having an anxiety or panic attack. The strong, rapid heartbeat really did make them fear the worst.

Why does our heart speed up so?

Anxiety and panic prepare us to deal with danger, either to stand and fight or run away (the 'fight-or-flight' response). The heart beats faster to pump oxygen (fuel) more quickly to the major muscle groups (arms, legs, chest) to provide them with an energy boost for fighting or fleeing. The greater the danger, the quicker we need energy to take action so the faster the heart pumps.

With long-term anxiety and stress our heart generally beats faster than normal at rest and it doesn't take much for it to increase into the first stages of panic (a harder, faster beat), which we notice as heart palpitations.

This also explains the 'skipped beats' phenomenon. A heart that is continuously beating faster than normal will occasionally miss a beat in order to correct the pace.

## **Breathing Too Fast**

In an effort to provide the extra oxygen (fuel) that our muscles need to take immediate action we breathe faster to take in more air.

In a truly dangerous situation this is exactly what we need – extra oxygen to keep our muscles supplied as we use it up rapidly in working them hard to fight or flee.

However, if we are breathing faster, drawing more oxygen into our blood, but not using it quickly (fighting or fleeing) – that is we are anxious but not taking any physical action – then our self-protective behaviour actually makes things worse for it disrupts the normal oxygen-carbon dioxide (O<sub>2</sub>-CO<sub>2</sub>) balance that exists in the blood.

In the normal breathing cycle we take in O<sub>2</sub> and expel CO<sub>2</sub>. During exercise we take in O<sub>2</sub> faster and expel CO<sub>2</sub> faster as needed. However, breathing faster without any corresponding increase in action leads to a build up of oxygen in the bloodstream, which has negative effects.

When we are breathing too fast (hyperventilating) it can feel as if there is not enough oxygen (which makes us more panicky). However, the reverse is true – we actually have too much oxygen. For although carbon dioxide is a waste gas that we breathe out, we need a certain amount of it in our bloodstream to be able to use up the oxygen we have. When we hyperventilate we end up with an excess of oxygen that we cannot actually use. Hence it can feel like we don't have enough oxygen.

This is why people who are hyperventilating are often told to breathe into paper bags – to breathe in the CO<sub>2</sub> they are breathing out, which redresses the O<sub>2</sub>-CO<sub>2</sub> balance. It also shows us why exercise and deep breathing (diaphragmatic breathing) can help alleviate anxiety.

## **Excessive Sweating**

Sweating too much (from the armpits, hands and often the face) is a very common anxiety symptom.

Sweating excessively usually happens during physical exertion (such as exercise) or when we are too hot. It's the body's way of helping us to cool down. The warm sweat reaches the body surface where it evaporates, taking heat away from the body.

We all know that we sweat during vigorous exercise and in high temperatures, but why do we sweat due to anxiety and panic?

The fight-or-flight response is initiated by adrenaline, which increases our body's metabolism to prepare us for action. This increase in metabolism produces heat.

To counteract this, adrenaline also stimulates the sweat glands to cool down any heat produced so even small amounts of anxiety may cause us to sweat more. Many people experience 'sweaty palms' even though they are only mildly anxious.

## **Feeling Nauseous / Needing the Toilet**

It takes many hours and numerous body resources to extract the nutrients and process the waste from any food that we have eaten – time and resources we can't spare in an emergency.

As such, any half-digested food needs to be got rid of quickly, either from the mouth or the other end. It probably depends on where the food is sitting in our system (the top half or bottom half) as to which way is possible to expel it.

This fight-or-flight response also explains why we often have no appetite or feel sick at the thought of food when we are anxious.

### **Dizziness and Feeling Faint**

Dizziness can have a number of physical causes such as ear infections, diabetes and circulation problems so it is very important to have any recurring dizziness checked out by a doctor.

When no physical causes are present it is highly likely that bouts of dizziness are due to anxiety. When we are anxious or panicky many of us feel light-headed and dizzy. We often become confused and find it difficult to think straight or concentrate. Some people think they are about to faint... but why?

In part, once again, it boils down to that diversion of resources to those things we need to survive. Blood is diverted from the higher regions of our brain to the areas we need most in the moment, such as vision and hearing. We don't need time to think, just time to be ultra aware and act. If we had to think about jumping out of the way of a speeding car it would be too late.

Hearing and vision become more acute when we are anxious and it's interesting to note that one of the side effects of many beta blockers (which essentially prevent adrenaline from doing it's job) is blurred vision.

Too much oxygen in the bloodstream (related to the O<sub>2</sub>-CO<sub>2</sub> balance we covered earlier) can also make us feel light-headed and dizzy.

### **Trembling and Shakiness**

Going back to that dimly lit alley... as we approach the dark doorways, in which anything could be hiding, we feel 'jittery' and shaky. Our muscles are trembling; they are primed and ready to spring into action in a split second. Adrenaline has flooded our system to energize us, which make us feel shaky.

Shakiness (or trembling) is extremely common and is one sure fire way to tell when someone is anxious. Many people who appear outwardly calm often feel shaky inside when anxiety strikes.

On a popular TV quiz show, where the contestants answer questions and can double their winnings up to a million, the quizmaster has said to many contestants, words to the effect, "You look remarkably calm". In nearly every instance, the reply has been the same – "On the outside yes, but inside I'm shaking like a leaf."

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All the above represent the physical aspects of anxiety. The sensations (symptoms) experienced and the strength of these sensations vary from person to person.

Some people sweat more, others tremble whilst for many the main focus is palpitations.

It's important to realise that when we focus on one particular symptom and start to worry about it, this causes more anxiety and actually increases the problem.

With symptoms such as sweating and shaking where our 'weakness' is clearly visible to others it is remarkably easy to fall into a cycle of worrying about the problem which increases anxiety, which increases the problem, which increases the worrying and so on.

## **Worrying**

We all worry about bad things that could happen, to some extent. It's usually about things we cannot fully control such as falling ill, accidents happening, losing our job, financial troubles and being attacked.

Worrying causes us to consider these things and what the consequences may be. It guides us into taking pre-emptive action to avoid them. This level of worry is normal and in a sense it may be better described as planning.

Planning reflects attempts to be in control. Armies plan and re-plan for possible future events in order to have some idea of what to do if they arise. To man, planning does indeed instil a sense of knowledge and competence in the face of unforeseen events.

An appropriate amount of planning and worrying is adaptive and conducive to survival... excessive worry is not.

Excessive worrying results when our planning doesn't make us feel any more secure and it doesn't allay our anxiety. It's one of the main symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder. Here, when our anxiety is great, we believe that we are anxious (prepared) because something bad is going to happen – but what? We don't know, so we imagine various bad things that could happen and start planning to avoid them. But the planning is not real control; it doesn't help the future and it doesn't make us feel any better or safer. It is illusory, only secondary control, and it doesn't work. So we plan more, feel worse and plan more.

Now we are no longer planning carefully about what to do, just worrying excessively about a myriad of things that could happen. And we cannot stop it because we feel it *is* the answer. We believe it is the way to get control and stop potential bad things from happening.

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## **Anxiety Symptoms and Problems (*Overview*)**

Anxiety involves a series of reflexes, responses and reactions in our mind and body that help to keep us safe. We get scared at the thought of something dangerous to keep us away from it and our heart speeds up in the face of an actual threat to provide our muscles with a quick energy boost so we can fight or flee.

This is natural; this is normal. We all have anxiety.

The word '*symptoms*' implies an illness. Yet in a different context, these symptoms (or sensations) can be associated with pleasure and joy.

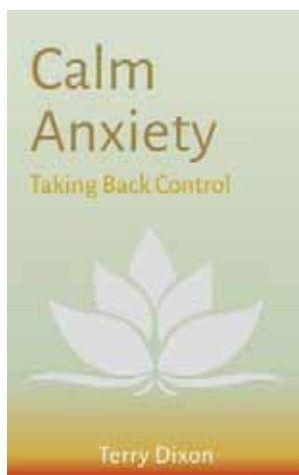
The speeding heart on a rollercoaster and the apprehension when watching a horror film are seen as exciting to many people. Indeed, we often actively seek out these sensations.

The difference between pleasure or pain lies in what we attribute the feelings and sensations to. To be scared for interviews is normal; to be scared for tests is normal; to be scared for first dates is normal. And to be very scared when confronted by a thug or a wild animal is also totally normal. Problems arise when we start to get so anxious for no apparent reason (or so it appears). Truth be told, there is a reason and successfully dealing with anxiety problems involves correcting what is actually causing the anxiety rather than trying to stop the anxiety itself.

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Help for Anxiety... *(Further reading)*

## Calm Anxiety: Taking Back Control



For high anxiety, nervousness and low self-esteem.

A unique way to understand and deal with the increased anxiety that plagues so many of us today, this book reveals why we become so anxious in the first place and shows how to use this knowledge to stop all of the fear, anxiety and self-doubt.

Read the First Chapter at: [www.help-for.com/ca-chapter1.htm](http://www.help-for.com/ca-chapter1.htm)

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