

Understanding your Anxiety Symptoms

Gerald Quimby, PsyD

The whole purpose of this article is to remove a bit of the mystery surrounding anxiety. The more that is understood, the less frightening it is, and the less frightening it is, the more manageable it is. The information presented here is meant to provide a basic understanding of the physical sensations that are typically associated with anxiety. Then we can use that understanding to change the thoughts and beliefs associated with anxiety. Our physical sensations affect our thoughts and our thoughts and beliefs affect our physical experience. In Part 2, we will focus on how thoughts and beliefs affect anxiety and learn how to end this vicious cycle.

With that in mind, the first thing that needs to be done is to modify the terminology that is often used when one is experiencing anxiety. It is commonly referred to as an “*Anxiety Attack*” or a “*Panic Attack*.” Rest assured, anxiety is not an evil entity within you that plots and executes an offensive against your well-being, though you may feel that it is at times. The word “attack” is a bit too dramatic and instantly puts you on the defensive with a feeling of not having control. To be more precise, a person experiences an “*Anxiety EPISODE*” because the occurrence is generally episodic. Like hiccoughs are episodic. Like sneezing fits are episodic. Not a collection of revolutionary or ill-tempered cells conspiring to make you nervous. Moving on ...

PART 1 – The Body and Anxiety

One of the most asked questions people have when they experience an anxiety episode is, “Why”. WHY do I feel this way? WHY is this happening to me? WHY? WHY? WHY? Oddly enough, merely asking the question WHY, is actually sustaining your anxiety and making yourself feel worse. So let’s try to answer your WHYs so you don’t go on and invent scary reasons to make your anxiety worse.

Let’s start with WHY you feel the way you do. Anxiety, referred by many as nervousness, is felt on different levels. We have all felt it many times in our lives. Anxiety was that feeling you got as a child when you broke your mom’s favorite coffee cup and you knew you were in trouble. It was the feeling you got when you had to give class presentations in school and feared everyone watching you. It was that feeling you got when the police car pulled up behind you and flashed the blue lights when you were speeding. It was that feeling you got on your wedding day because, well, it was your wedding day. We get anxiety when we look forward to something as well as dreading something. Those are all examples of normal, everyday anxiety.

So, what about “*that feeling*”? What is it? Perhaps the best way to conceptualize it is to think of it as an alert signal. It is an alert to warn of an impending event and start the process of preparing the body to deal with that event. Depending on the nature of the event, the alert can range from a

gentle nudge to full on battle stations! So in a way, anxiety can be looked at as being the body's early warning system and part of the genetically engrained self-preservation system.

For example, imagine you are hiking in the mountains and step onto a large boulder to take in the beautiful vista of the valley below. As you step closer to the edge of the rock you notice it stands at the edge of a very tall and vertical cliff. Stepping still closer to the edge, you start to feel an odd sensation in your stomach and perhaps some tingling as you gingerly inch forward. The closer to the edge you get, the taller that cliff looks, and the more intense that feeling gets. That is anxiety and it is warning you to be careful that you don't get too close because something undesirable could happen to you (e.g. falling). Self-preservation at work. If you are good at imagining, you might even have felt a mild sensation as you saw this scenario in your mind. Again, this is every day, normal anxiety. What about those full blown episodes of anxiety. The ones that come out of the blue. You feel a whole lot more than just a tingle and butterflies in the stomach. Indeed you do.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

To understand what you feel, we need to talk about what is commonly referred to as the “*fight or flight*” response. This is triggered when a threat is sensed by our early warning system to prepare the body to confront or escape the threat, hence the term, fight or flight. This is actually part of our *autonomic nervous system* which is comprised of two main subsystems, the *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic*. The sympathetic nervous system is referred to as *fight or flight* while the parasympathetic nervous system is referred to as “*rest and digest*” or sometimes “*feed and breed*”. These two systems work automatically, giving the name “*autonomic*” nervous system, to configure your body to best respond to whatever circumstance you find yourself in.

To illustrate this, imagine sitting comfortably on a shady park bench feeding small birds. As you are sitting, you are in a resting state, comfortable, and without a care in the world. At this point, your parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest) is in control. Suddenly, you hear dogs barking angrily, your body quickly switches such that your sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) is now in control. You look around and see that a dog is barking at another dog. Both dogs are on leashes and well under control by their owners. You assess that the dogs are not a threat and return to feeding the birds and your body returns to parasympathetic control. This back and forth between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems goes on all day every day in response to what is going on in your environment. Even while you sleep in response to dreams.

Here is what actually goes on when the sympathetic nervous system, or fight or flight, is triggered. Your heart rate increases pumping blood throughout your body supplying oxygen to your muscles and vital organs, your blood pressure increases to better enable physical activity. Your breathing becomes more rapid and your bronchial passages open up to allow for a greater volume of air. The way your body draws energy changes to gain access to vast amounts of energy very quickly. Blood is pushed from the extremities and non-vital organs into muscles and vital organs. Other changes include, the digestive system is suppressed, pupils dilate, adrenal glands secrete adrenalin, and senses overall make you more acutely aware of what is going on around you. There's more that happens but it is clear the body is no longer in a resting state.

There is a lot there that may seem familiar to what you might have experienced during a severe episode of anxiety. Common complaints from those with anxiety are, rapid heart rate, rapid breathing, shortness of breath, chest pressure or pain, nauseous or flip-floppy stomach, tingling hands or arms, feeling restless or uneasy, shaking/tremors, a sense that something is about to happen. In fact, every single one of the symptoms you feel with anxiety are due, in part, to your fight or flight system being activated. The other part is what you are thinking. More on that in Part 2. The most important thing to consider during an episode of anxiety is that your physical symptoms are normal, expected, and nothing to be concerned about. **Anxiety is annoying, uncomfortable, but not physically harmful to you.**

BREATHING

People often say the scariest thing about having an anxiety episode has to do with breathing. More specifically, difficulty catching their breath, experiencing shortness of breath, and chest pressure. This occurs because of the changes in breathing when fight or flight kicks in. Recall that the bronchi dilates and the respiration rate increases. A few things can happen. Breathing too deeply too long, can lead to hyperventilation giving an excess of oxygen in your system. This can cause a buildup of air in the body, dizziness, and light-headedness. Breathing too shallow too long can lead to an excess of carbon dioxide in the body which triggers or increases an anxiety response to induce breathing.

While that is going on, recall that the heart rate is also increased and as the increased flow of blood goes through the lungs, it releases more and more carbon dioxide into the lungs and pulls oxygen into the blood. If the body demands more oxygen than it's getting from the lungs, it will want to stimulate deeper breathing. The problem begins when there is more carbon dioxide being put in the lungs than is being exhaled because the breathing was too shallow. When this happens, the lungs are already full of carbon dioxide so an attempt to inhale results in a sensation of not being able to breathe. Why? Because the bag is full and the pressure differences that facilitate the exchange of gases (oxygen/carbon dioxide) is disrupted. All of this can lead to a feeling of pressure or tightness can be felt in the chest area. This is precisely the reason why breathing exercises are so important in the management of anxiety. **Breathing exercises work to slow and control breathing in order to return the blood gases (O₂ and CO₂) in balance and start to turn off the anxiety alarm.**

RESTLESSNESS

During an anxiety episode, many describe being in a state of restlessness, unease, and feeling like they are unable to sit still. It's not unusual to feel compelled to pace about or engage in busy work, anything, as long as there is movement because just sitting is too uncomfortable. To explain WHY this happens, simply look back to the fight or flight response. While in a resting state, energy is provided in a way that tends to be, slow and steady. Which is fine for eating popcorn while watching a movie, but not so much during an emergency. When fight or flight kicks in, changes occur to make large amounts of energy available very quickly.

This can be a life saver if it is needed right away however, if it's not needed but just sits there, it contributes to that feeling of restlessness and unease. This can be illustrated by watching race

horses at the starting gate, as they bang and bump the gate door, wanting to run. But the gate holds them back making them more restless until at last, the gate flies open and the horses speed down the track. It's like that. Having all this energy available but being held back, gives that feeling of restlessness which can sometimes be expressed by visible shaking or tremors.

That feeling of anticipation and restlessness is often accompanied by a feeling that something is going to happen. This tends to quicken your reflexes because you are essentially a wound spring just waiting to be sprung. It won't take much to leap into action if needed. Imagine wandering through an unfamiliar haunted house, in the dark, alone. You are anticipating something scary to happen at any time but you don't know when, where, or how. Your fight or flight is fully engaged. Suddenly an arm reaches out of the darkness towards you and touches your shoulder. You scream, you jump, you run away, you live to be scared another day because you had the energy and the reflexes to escape.

The main difference between the haunted house scenario and a typical anxiety episode is that at the haunted house, it was expected that something would happen and the triggering stimulus is identified so the feelings and sensations associated with the experience do not seem out of place or concerning. However with an anxiety episode, the feelings occur seemingly out of the blue for no particular reason. Because there is no identifiable cause for the feeling, then anxiety tends to become the focus of attention and worsens because it is made to be a matter of concern. In other words, the more anxious you get, the more anxious you get. This is the main difference between what can be considered normal, everyday anxiety, and clinical anxiety. **It is important to note that body's response is the same regardless of whether a triggering event is expected or comes out of the blue, it is the same anxiety.**

STOMACH ISSUES

Another common symptom that is felt involves sensations in the stomach. People often complain of feeling butterflies, nauseous, heartburn, or unsettled stomach when feeling anxious. Again, this is a normal response when fight or flight is engaged. Essentially, stomach function is suspended as the blood and energy typically involved with digestion is diverted to essential organs and muscle. What results depends a lot on what and when you ate.

There is a broad range of things that can be experienced from something as mild as just having the sensation of butterflies in the stomach all the way to vomiting. When the digestive system suspends, there could be a lot of undigested or partially digested food in the stomach and if it is too heavy, the body may want to purge it. There may be an excessive amount of acid which may contribute to heartburn or reflux issues. Stomach acid is sometimes responsible for complaints of chest pain during anxiety episodes and is often mistaken as having a heart attack.

The bottom line is, it is normal, albeit uncomfortable, to feel some level of stomach upset or even vomit when having an anxiety episode. It's what the body does and it is all about preparing the body to best deal with the issue at hand.

SUMMARY

There are many other changes that the body undergoes when fight or flight is triggered. The ones presented here have been the more common symptoms that people complain about. The bottom line, and my goal for Part 1, is to tell you that the physical symptoms typically experienced during anxiety are normal, expected, and with a clear understanding of why. In other words, your body is doing what it's supposed to do. Just not necessarily when it's supposed to do it. So the next time an anxiety episode occurs, apply this knowledge and see if it helps, even just a little.

Use the recommendations below, which are based on how the body normally works, to help take control over the anxiety:

- Your body is responding ***normally*** to an abnormal trigger
 - Expect increased heart-rate, blood pressure, and respiration
 - Expect to feel restless and jumpy, remember you're a wound spring on purpose
 - Expect your stomach to feel unsettled
- Move around, take a walk, do something to burn off some of the energy
- Get your breathing back to its normal rate
 - Use the Relaxed Breathing Exercise
 - Start with an EXHALE first then INHALE
 - Let your shoulders drop and your arms hang as you exhale
- Relax and allow your breathing to continue normally

Later in Part 2, we will add recommendations that include ways to think and what to believe. For now, practice the physical recommendations above.