

## Anxiety and Panic

Anxiety can be defined as a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome. The two elements which are suggested in this definition are unpredictability and threat - two prime movers for anxiety.

Anxiety is normal, as we live in an uncertain world, which contains threats to our person or lifestyle in some way. However, we all experience anxiety differently and there are wide variations. Studies suggest that a vulnerability to anxiety may run in families. In addition, folks with anxiety may also experience a heightened risk of depressed mood.

Excessive anxiety can be very disabling and be expressed in our:

- Thinking or cognition - for instance a “racing” mind, or intrusive worries
- Emotion - a feeling of dread or that we have some terrible medical condition
- Body - tense muscles, headache, racing heart, tight chest, sweating, hyperventilation etc
- Behaviour - restlessness and agitation

It may well be that threats to us (anything which may harm us in some way), as well as uncertainty, set off the **fight and flight response**. This is the hard-wired self protective system in us, which readies us to action. The symptoms of anxiety reflect the operation of this response.

Sometimes the response becomes extreme and a panic attack may ensue; a most distressing expression of anxiety. There are various psychological disorders which entail anxiety.

Whilst the energy and focus generated by the fight and flight response may be helpful to overcome life's obstacles, an excessive degree of anxiety / panic may interfere with, and forestall, problem solving. The main issue may become coping with anxiety / panic, rather than dealing with the presenting problem.

What to do? We need a little anxiety but not too much. Understanding anxiety and panic can be helpful, as we then know what is happening to us and feel more in control. Other useful strategies are:

- Relaxed breathing to reduce hyperventilation
- Meditation to help lower nervous arousal by focus on a point
- Mindfulness to help keep us in the moment
- Exercise to burn stress and tension and promote healthy brain chemistry
- Focus on our thinking - content and style, so challenge anxious thoughts

If you are finding anxiety / panic is making your life more difficult than it should be or is causing continuing distress, please take some steps to improve your situation. This may include seeing a psychologist, using your EAP scheme, improving your understanding of anxiety and utilising some of the strategies above.