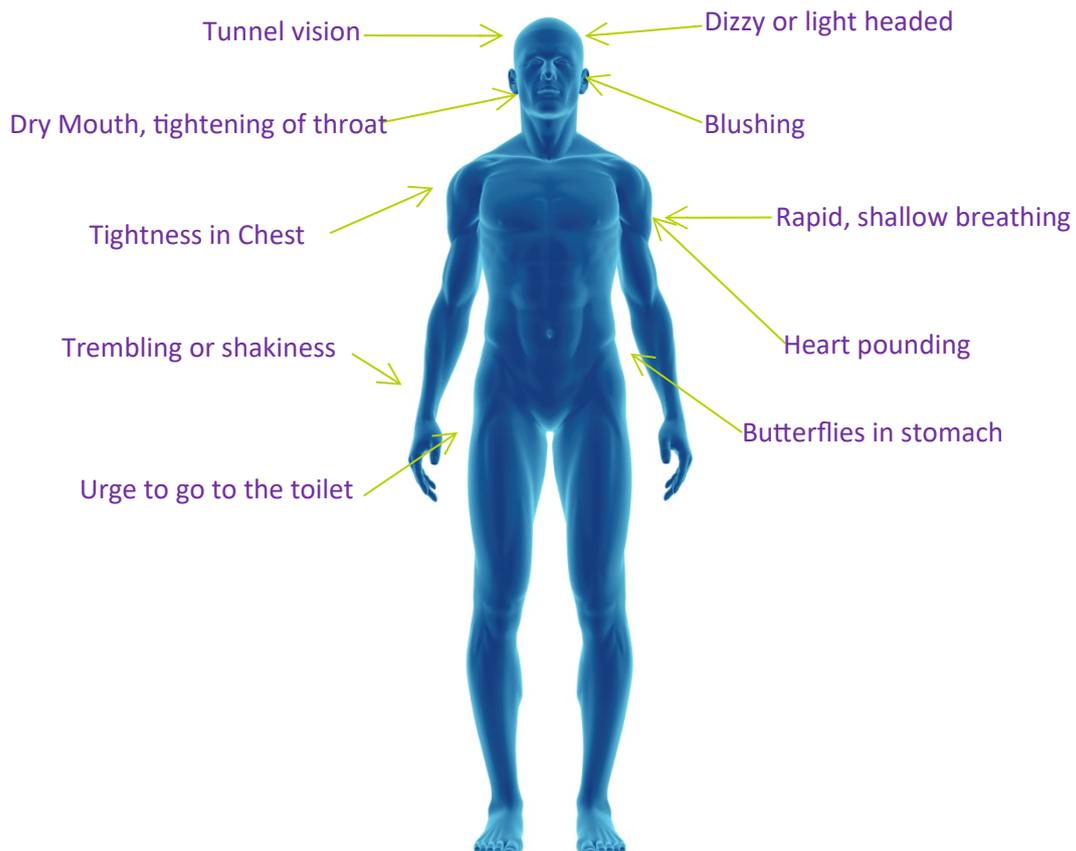


## Anxiety

Anxiety can come in many different forms, from day to day low level stress and tension through to extreme panic. It's important to remember that anxiety is a normal human emotion which is an automatic response to perceived threats around us, and is in-built to keep us safe. In prehistoric times, when we lead much simpler lives, anxiety, also known as our fight or flight response was our safety mechanism to stop us being eaten by a prowling tiger – in modern times we still have the same in built mechanism even though we now live very different lives to our ancestors. When our fight or flight response is triggered – say when we experience a traumatic incident, it takes roughly 72 hours for our hormone levels to return back to normal. Anxiety itself is not problematic- the problem is an anxiety disorder, which is when our fight or flight response is triggered when no danger is present.

In order to understand anxiety, it is important to understand your symptoms – as mentioned above, these vary from person to person. The diagram below shows what happens in our bodies when our fight or flight response is triggered:



Anxiety disorders are diagnosed when our fight or flight mechanism become over active – perceiving danger in things that are low risk – it is malfunctioning, causing your body to experience the effects of your fight or flight mechanism when it is not required.

Panic attacks and phobias are common symptoms that stem from feeling anxious – in this module we will not look at either in detail, but there are links to more specific support in the ‘useful links’ section should you need it.

## Symptoms of Anxiety

Below are some of the common symptoms of anxiety take some time to read through each and rate how often you experience them (1=not at all; 2= not often; 3= sometimes; 4=often; 5= all of the time)

- Tense muscles can cause headaches or pain in our neck, shoulders or back.*
- A dry mouth can make it hard to swallow.*
- We may get breathless and dizzy, or feel faint from breathing more rapidly.*
- We may experience indigestion, butterflies, constipation or diarrhoea because adrenaline causes blood to be taken away from the digestion process to the heart and muscles.*
- Our heart may beat alarmingly quickly.*
- We may experience panic as the fight or flight adrenalin response occurs.*
- We may find it hard to concentrate on anything and become very irritable with other people.*
- We may feel weepy and emotional, and our thoughts may become negative.*
- We may experience difficulties sleeping and end up exhausted as a result.*

With anxiety, our worries are mainly based around future events and what ‘might happen if...’ Mindfulness can be very helpful in managing anxiety as it teaches us to focus on the here and now and be present in this moment. There are lots of free resources available that can help us be more mindful, some of which are listed in the ‘useful links’ section at the end of this document.

## Spotting your Anxious Thoughts

When we are able to notice ourselves feeling anxious we can begin to look at what anxious thoughts we are having – in understanding what is worrying us, we then have the power to challenge these anxious thoughts.

It can be tricky to spot your anxious thoughts at first, particularly if you have been feeling anxious for a while. Start by noticing the most intense, or strongest feelings of anxiety. When you notice these feelings, try writing down what your worry is. If you can catch your anxious thoughts in that moment this is best, however if not try and write down your anxious thought as soon after as possible.

Some helpful questions to ask yourself might be:

- *What is going through my head right now?*
- *What am I afraid might happen?*
- *What is it about this situation that makes me feel worried?*

**Action Point:** Try filling out the table below with some of your most common anxious thoughts

The format below can be helpful for beginning to challenge our anxious thoughts:

Anxious Thought	Evidence to support anxious thought	Evidence against anxious thought	Possible other options
Everyone is talking about me	I notice the lady in the hairdressers pointing at me and whispering to the other woman	No one else seemed to notice me, or say anything	Maybe she liked my new haircut She might have known my sister

Our module on Stress has a guide to problem solving – this may also be useful to have a read through.

### Common Thinking Errors

Our patterns of thinking can become distorted or exaggerated. Some people may notice they struggle to see things positively. Below are some of the most common thinking errors. Take some time to read through each and notice which ones may apply to your thinking patterns. The next time you find yourself feeling anxious, try and notice which thinking errors may be active in that moment.

<p><b>Selective Thinking</b> Only seeing one side. Seeing the negative and rejecting any positives</p>	<p><b>Overgeneralizing</b> One small piece of evidence is enough for us to draw a negative conclusion</p>	<p><b>Jumping to Conclusions</b> Making assumptions based on little evidence</p>
<p><b>All or Nothing Thinking</b> It's either perfect or a disaster, with no in-between</p>	<p><b>Predicting the future</b> Expecting a negative outcome to a situation before it has even begun</p>	<p><b>Black and White Thinking</b> Thinking in extremes, and struggling to see the grey in the middle</p>
<p><b>Mind Reading</b> Guessing what other people are thinking, or assuming you already know without checking it out</p>	<p><b>'Should' Statements</b> Having strong beliefs about what you 'should' or 'shouldn't' do and having judgements based on these</p>	<p><b>Catastrophizing</b> Always seeing the worst case scenario with little evidence</p>

Many people recover from anxiety disorders by understanding what their symptoms are and finding ways to manage and protect against triggers. By taking small steps to understand how anxiety impacts on you, and improving self-care we can begin to take control of our emotions, and become more emotionally resilient.

### Useful Links

NHS information on Mindfulness <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx>

Free mindfulness downloads <http://www.freemindfulness.org/download>

Be Mindful <http://bemindful.co.uk/>

NHS info on Anxiety <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Self- Help workbook on Anxiety <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/anxiety.asp>