

Understanding Anxiety & the Nervous System

A guide to understanding what anxiety is, why it happens, and how your body responds



At its core, anxiety is your body's built-in alarm system; an ancient response designed to keep you alert to danger. When triggered, it fires up your fight, flight, or freeze responses, leading to symptoms like a pounding heart, sweaty palms, or rapid breathing. These reactions were once essential for survival in life-or-death situations.

Today, though, our bodies react the same way even when the "threat" is just a stressful email or a crowded room.

Remember: anxiety isn't your fault. It's a natural, automatic process that once kept us safe. Anxiety and anxiety disorders are very common, and while we don't fully understand why some people experience them more than others, both genetics and environment play a role.

Knowing this can help you approach your anxiety with more understanding and less self-blame

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SELF COMPASSION

Let's shift your perspective on anxiety by bringing in some. It's natural to feel frustrated or confused about why anxiety shows up, but often it's a sign that something important to you feels at risk.

Practicing self-compassion can make a big difference.

When you treat yourself with kindness instead of criticism, you interrupt the cycle of anxious thoughts and create space for calm and understanding. This gentle approach helps regulate your emotions, reduces stress, and builds resilience; making it easier to handle anxious moments.

Think back to a recent moment of anxiety. Which of these did it relate to?

Tick all that apply:

- ☐ A threat to my safety
- ☐ A threat to the safety or wellbeing of a loved one
- ☐ A threat to my job or finances
- ☐ A threat to my reputation or social status
- ☐ A threat to my health
- ☐ A threat to my relationship(s)

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SELF AWARENESS

Understanding The Trigger

Anxiety often has a starting point; a trigger that sets those feelings in motion. This trigger could be a thought, a memory, a physical sensation, or something that happens around you. Reflecting on a recent anxious moment and identifying what sparked it can give you valuable insight.

For example: hearing sudden loud noises, scrolling through upsetting news, getting unexpected feedback, remembering a past mistake, or even skipping a meal.

Think about a few recent times you felt anxious.

What were some common triggers in those moments? List them below.

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COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Common Types Of Unhelpful Thinking

Everyone sometimes experiences unhelpful ways of thinking that can skew how we see ourselves, others, and the world. These habitual mental patterns, known as Cognitive Distortion, can shape our emotions and actions in misleading ways. While it's common to have these thoughts from time to time, they may cause difficulties if they happen often.



All-or-Nothing Thinking: Viewing situations in extremes, with no middle ground; things are either all good or all bad.



Should Statements: Rigidly thinking in terms of how you or others "should" or "must" behave, leading to guilt or frustration when reality doesn't match expectations.



Mental Filtering: Focusing solely on the negative aspects of a situation and ignoring the positives.



Jumping to Conclusions: Making negative interpretations without actual evidence.



Overgeneralization: Drawing broad conclusions from a single event or piece of evidence, often expecting repeated failure based on one setback.



Emotional Reasoning: Believing that because you feel a certain way, it must be true (e.g., "I feel anxious, so something bad must be happening").

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Learning to reframe your thoughts before they spiral can be a powerful way to calm yourself and manage anxiety. This isn't about forcing yourself to be positive. It's about bringing more balance and logic to your thinking. Anxiety often pushes us toward worstcase scenarios or harsh self-judgment, so practicing more realistic self-talk can really help.

Original thought: "I embarrassed myself in that conversation. Everyone must think I'm awkward."

Reframe: "I felt awkward for a moment, but everyone has those times. Most people probably didn't even notice, and it doesn't define who I am."

Original thought: "If I don't get this perfect, everything will fall apart."

Reframe: "I want to do my best, but it's okay if things aren't perfect. I can handle whatever happens, and mistakes are part of learning."

What are some of the common cognitive distortions you recognise in your thinking patterns? Write them below.

Can you identify any recurring thoughts that you could try to reframe? Write them below and consider how you might view them in a more balanced or compassionate way.

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ANXIETY & THE BODY

How anxiety effects your nervous system

Sometimes, anxiety can linger even after you've tried to reframe your thoughts.

This doesn't mean that reframing isn't useful, practicing it regularly can be very effective over time, but it often signals that your nervous system is too activated to be soothed by logic alone.

You might notice that, even when you know your anxious thoughts aren't entirely logical, your body still feels on edge. That's because anxiety triggers the sympathetic nervous system, the part of us wired to detect threats and prepare for action. When this happens, your body needs reassurance as much as your mind.

Below are some simple ways to help regulate your nervous system.

1. EFT Tapping
2. Grounding Techniques
3. Box Breathing
4. Exhale with a audible sigh
5. Doing something creative
6. Reconnect with something that use to bring you joy
7. Jump up and down on the spot
8. Eat slowly and mindfully
9. Listen to a progressive body relaxation meditation
10. Hum, Chant or Sing
11. Lie down with your legs up against the wall
12. Use your senses using the 5,4,3,2,1 method (five things you see, four you can touch, three you hear, two you smell, and one you taste.)

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MY ANXIETY JOURNAL

A space for you to reflect

What were my anxious thoughts today? i.e. I'm not good enough, it's going to go wrong

Can I identify a trigger? i.e. an event, an image, a conversation with somebody

What did I feel was at threat? i.e. my health, my safety, my social status

Did I recognise any unhelpful thinking styles? i.e. catastrophising, all or nothing thinking

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MY ANXIETY JOURNAL

Reflecting on my strategies

How I re-phrased my thoughts: i.e. "I don't have to do things perfectly, I can find a middle ground"

I practiced regulating my nervous system by: i.e. I practiced a breathing exercise, I tried a tapping technique

Other ways I supported myself: i.e. talking to a friend, drinking less caffeine, taking breaks

Make a note of where your levels of anxiety started vs how they were after you practiced ways to self-soothe

low (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10) high