PART ONE

Understanding Anxiety

1
The Three Aspects of Anxiety

Who hasn't, at one time or another, been worried or anxious?

We've all experienced doubts, fears and worries; most of us have experienced feeling tense, uncertain and even fearful at the thought of speaking to a group or sitting an exam, having an operation, attending an interview or starting a new job.

Maybe right now you're worried about a forthcoming social event or driving somewhere new on your own. Perhaps you get anxious when your partner or teenager is late home. If everything goes well – your partner or teenager arrives home, the social event or the journey has been and gone – the anxiety will go with it, but until it is over, the hours, days or weeks leading up to it can be very difficult.

Perhaps you're worried about losing your job or something dreadful happening to your partner or children. You may be anxious about events that feel like they're beyond

your control: being attacked, being made redundant or never being able to own your own home. Perhaps you fret about global warming or getting cancer.

Whatever it is that's worrying you and making you anxious, it can have an effect on both your body and your mind. Anxiety can leave you feeling uncomfortable or even physically unwell. It can be an annoying distraction or it can leave you unable to think about anything else whatsoever.

Anxiety can erode your confidence and self-esteem, affect your relationships and friendships and impair your ability to study and work. If, for whatever reason, you experience prolonged or intense anxiety, you may find it difficult to deal with in your everyday life; you may feel powerless and out of control.

> 'Sometimes, anxiety takes over my life – I find myself worrying about everything, even small things like my son forgetting his PE kit become an overwhelming concern.'

After a while, you may start to fear the symptoms of anxiety and this can set up a vicious circle. You may be anxious because you dread the feelings of anxiety, but then you experience those symptoms because you're having anxious thoughts. You feel that something bad will or might happen and you don't know how or if you will be able to cope.

Anxiety is the anticipation of trouble, misfortune or adversity, difficulties or disaster. If you haven't any experience of an event or situation, you may be anxious about what

could happen or how you will cope with it. But if you *have* experienced a particular situation and you found it difficult or distressing in some way, you may be anxious about facing a similar situation again in case it brings up the same challenges and difficulties.

Is there a difference between anxiety and fear, worry and doubt? Doubt happens when you feel uncertain about something: you think it's unlikely that something will turn out well. Worry concerns feelings of unease and feeling troubled. *Fear* is a reaction to *immediate* danger – your car going into a skid, for example, or a child running into the road – whereas anxiety involves a response to something farther away in the future: something that's going to happen later today, tomorrow, next week and so on. It could be, for example, an interview, a plane flight or speaking up at a meeting. You could be feeling anxious but you don't know what exactly you're anxious about.

Whether it's fear, anxiety, worry or doubt, the feelings are very much the same. Why? Why does anxiety so often have such a debilitating effect? It helps to understand what, exactly, anxiety is.

Just like fear, worry and doubt, anxiety is an emotion. Emotions cause us to feel, think and act in different ways: they can cause us to do something or avoid doing something.

All emotions, including anxiety, have a positive intent: worrying and feeling anxious about doing well before an exam or giving a presentation, for example, can prompt you to prepare well and keep you alert and focused.

However, like all other emotions, anxiety becomes a problem if, instead of prompting you to respond in a way that's helpful, it overwhelms or paralyses you. In the example of exams, if anxiety takes over, your stomach may be in knots, your heart thumps and negative thoughts can dominate your mind. Your ability to revise, think straight and concentrate suffers.

It's not, though, just how and what you think that can make you anxious. Again, just like all other emotions, anxiety has three parts: physical feelings, thoughts and behaviour. Let's look at each of these aspects more closely.

Physical aspect

This part of anxiety involves the physical changes that occur in your body – the internal bodily changes you experience.

Some of the most common physical symptoms of anxiety are:

- Muscle tension, which can cause headaches, tension in your jaw, neck and shoulder pain or tightness in your throat and chest.
- Rapid breathing, which may make you feel weak, light-headed and shaky, and may give you pins and needles in your fingers and toes.
- Rising blood pressure, which can make you more aware of a pounding heart.
- A rush of hormones, which can give you hot flushes and make you sweat.

- Changes in the blood supply to your digestive system, which may cause 'butterflies', nausea and sickness.
- Frequent visits to the loo.

Anxiety can go undiagnosed – especially if it presents as a physical problem. Stomach problems, for example – a queasy tummy, feelings of nausea and/or a frequent, urgent need to use the loo – can often be the result of feeling anxious about a forthcoming event, but may not be recognized as such.

Although we each have different thoughts when we are anxious, we all have very similar *physical* responses. Regardless of age, race or gender, when we are stressed, anxious or frightened our bodies release hormones which spread to different parts of the body. Adrenaline causes your heart to beat faster to carry blood where it's most needed. You breathe more rapidly to provide the extra oxygen required for energy. You sweat to prevent overheating. Your digestive system slows down to allow more blood to be sent to your muscles. Your senses become heightened and your brain is on full alert.

These changes help your body to take action to protect you in a dangerous situation, either by running away or fighting. This is known as the 'fight or flight' reflex. Once the danger has passed, other hormones are released, which may cause you to tremble and feel weak as your muscles start to relax.

This response is useful for protecting you against physical dangers – a runaway car or a falling tree, for example – but if there is no physical threat and you don't need to run

away or fight, the effects of adrenaline subside more slowly and you may go on feeling agitated for a long time.

> 'The feeling of having in the middle of my body a ball of wool that quickly winds itself up, its innumerable threads pulling from the surface of my body to itself.'
>
> **Franz Kafka**

Interestingly, two very different emotions – anxiety and excitement – provoke the same physical response: rapid breathing and a pounding heart. In that case, what determines whether what you feel is happy or anxious? Your thoughts.

Cognitive aspect

Your thoughts – your beliefs, perceptions and interpretations of a forthcoming event – are the cognitive aspect of anxiety.

Different people may have different thoughts about a situation. For example, in the case of sitting an exam, one person might be thinking, 'I don't know if I can do this. I might be hopeless. I could fail.' But another person's thoughts might be, 'What if I forget everything I revised? Supposing they don't ask questions related to the topics I've revised?' Often, added to your thoughts and concerns about a situation are the thoughts you might have about how you'll feel or behave once you're in that situation. You might think that you will:

- Lose control or go 'mad';
- Have a heart attack, be sick, faint or be incontinent;

- Be unable to stop thinking that people are looking at you and know you're anxious;
- Feel like things are speeding up/slowing down and that you'll be detached from your environment and the people in it;
- Want to run away and escape from the situation.

When your anxiety is high, you don't just think, 'I don't know if I can do this. I might be hopeless. I could fail.' You know and truly believe something: 'I *can't* do this. I *will* be hopeless. I *will* fail.'

When anxiety takes hold, rather than just acknowledge what might happen, you are convinced it *will* happen. This is known as 'cognitive fusion' – when a thought becomes fused with what it refers to. You experience a thought as a fact, a reality and an inevitability.

Behavioural aspect

The behavioural part of anxiety is the things you do or don't do when you're anxious. Just as we each have differing thoughts about a situation, we each behave in different ways too.

If, for example, you were anxious before an exam, you might pace up and down the room. But someone else might sit and bite their nails as a result of their worry or anxiety. Someone else might chain smoke or chew gum.

How we each behave when we're anxious or worried depends on a variety of things, including what has triggered

the anxiety, our ability to manage the situation and how the situation relates to our past experiences.

Instead of responding by doing something, your behaviour might involve *not* doing something: *avoidance* behaviour. In the example of the exam, you might actually avoid it by not turning up to sit the exam.

So, when you experience anxiety, it will be made up of these three aspects: physical, cognitive and behavioural. Imagine, for example, that you were anxious about speaking to a group of people. Here's how you might experience the anxiety:

- *Physical response:* Rapid breathing, increased pulse, stomach churning and hot flushes.
- *Cognitive response:* 'Oh no, I'll waffle on and not make myself clear and everyone will think I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't think I can do this.'
- *Behavioural response:* Biting your nails and fiddling with your pen.

There is no particular order in which the aspects of anxiety – or any other emotion – occur, but any one aspect can affect the others: how you think, feel and act are intrinsically linked.

For example, your anxious response to speaking to a group of people could begin with a *physical* reaction: rapid breathing, increased pulse, stomach churning and hot flushes. This may trigger a *behavioural* reaction: you bite your nails and fiddle with your pen. This may be immediately followed by the *thought*, 'Oh no, I'll waffle on and

not make myself clear and everyone will think I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't think I can do this.'

Or you could start biting your nails and fiddling with your pen first. This could trigger a physical response: rapid breathing, increased pulse, stomach churning and hot flushes. Again, your thoughts would follow closely behind.

Or your anxious response could begin with the thought, 'Oh no, I'll waffle on and not make myself clear and everyone will think I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't think I can do this.' This thought may then trigger rapid breathing, increased pulse, stomach churning and hot flushes. You then start biting your nails and fiddling with your pen.

To understand how this interaction of thoughts, feelings and behaviours works when you're anxious, write down your own example of an event that you often feel anxious about.

Situation:

Physical response: How I physically feel

Cognitive response: My thoughts

Behavioural response: What I do or don't do

Self-sustaining nature of anxiety

Seeing anxiety in terms of thoughts, physical feelings and behaviour makes it easier to see how they are connected and how they affect you. You can also see how anxiety can be self-sustaining: one aspect can feed another. For example, the more anxious thoughts you have, the more you might experience the physical feelings: a pounding heart, sweating and feeling short of breath. This might then prompt you to resort to unhelpful behaviours, which, in turn, make it more likely you'll experience further anxiety.

You may find yourself feeling anxious about feeling anxious. This then creates a spiral of difficult thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

You might, for example, feel anxious about speaking in meetings at work. You get hot and flustered and feel nauseous at the mere thought of being asked to speak at a meeting. Then you get anxious about your anxiety showing and everyone knowing you're anxious. So you do what you can to avoid meetings. But then you become anxious that your manager thinks you have nothing to contribute and as a result you feel you must work harder in other areas of your job in order to show that you do have something to contribute. Before you know it, you're in a cycle of worry.

And if you then dread your anxiety and its symptoms – the thoughts, feelings and behaviours – you may also develop new anxieties, or find more situations causing anxiety.

> 'My anxiety gives me moments of panic, fear and dread. I have so many physical symptoms such as headaches,

tingling in my fingers and stomach pains to the point where I think I must be ill with some terrible terminal disorder. Otherwise, why would I feel like this?'

Nature or nurture?

Are you born to be anxious or do you 'learn' to be anxious?

It could be that some people are born sensitive and predisposed to worry and anxiety. In his book *The Temperamental Thread: How Genes, Culture, Time and Luck Make Us Who We Are*, Harvard Professor Dr Jerome Kagan suggests that some of us display 'high-reactive' behaviour in the first few weeks and months of infancy and go on to be sensitive children and to be careful, cautious teenagers. However, for many 'high-reactive' children, as they move into adolescence, they seem to 'grow out' of being quiet, shy and timid. It just may be, though, that they've learnt to suppress or keep their worries hidden so their anxieties are not always apparent to others.

It could be, though, that you weren't born anxious but that feeling anxious could be something you *learned* early on in life. Close family members may have tended to be worried and anxious and transferred their anxiety to you. You then learned to respond in the same way.

Past stressful or traumatic experiences, such as domestic violence, abuse or bullying, can certainly contribute to anxiety. If common childhood fears, such as a fear of the dark or a fear of being left alone, weren't handled well by parents, the child may be more prone to anxiety in later life. If you had

a lot of change in your life when you were young, for example, moving house and schools, being ill (or someone close to you being ill) or seeing your parents separating – all events where you may have been unsure about what was going to happen next – this might make you more prone to anxiety.

If something distressing happened to you in the past – either as a child or an adult – and you struggled to deal with your emotions at the time, you may become anxious about the possibility of similar situations happening again in case they stir up the same anxious feelings.

> 'I've been bullied at work on and off for a number of years and I've suffered anxiety on a daily basis.'

Some people can clearly pinpoint a cause for their anxiety: a traumatic incident, a build-up of stress or having undergone a significant life event such as losing their job, a relationship breakdown or having surgery. It could be a current situation or a number of events or cumulative events that you are finding very stressful.

However, some people don't have an identifiable cause for their anxiety.

Anxiety, then, may be triggered by one thing or several events. It could be that you were born predisposed to being anxious or that it's a result of your upbringing, your past and/or current experiences. It could be a mixture of any of these factors.

What is certain, though, is that there is a sum total of forces at work when you're anxious: thoughts, physical

feelings and behaviour. And these forces, these aspects, interact with each other. Understanding this can help demystify anxiety. It can help you better understand the nature of anxiety – how and why it prompts you to feel, think and behave as you do when you're anxious.

The next step is to understand more about what can trigger anxiety and the different ways in which anxiety can present itself. Chapter 2 explains this.

In a nutshell

- Anxiety is the anticipation of trouble, misfortune or adversity, difficulties or disaster.
- Anxiety becomes a problem if, instead of prompting you to respond in a way that's helpful, it overwhelms or paralyses you.
- There are three aspects to anxiety: physical feelings, thoughts and behaviour.
  - The physical aspects help your body to take action to protect you in a dangerous situation. But if there is no real physical threat, your body may feel tense and wired for quite a long time.
  - The cognitive aspect of anxiety is your thoughts: the negative, distressing things you think and believe about what could or will happen.
  - The behavioural part of anxiety is the things you do or don't do when you're anxious.
- The three different aspects of anxiety interact with each other: any one part can trigger or feed another, which means that anxiety can be self-sustaining.