

# Chapter 1

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## All About Anxiety

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Finding out why and how you experience anxiety
  - ▶ Discovering the benefits of anxiety
  - ▶ Knowing when anxiety becomes a problem
  - ▶ Using CBT to alleviate anxiety
- .....

**A**nxiety is just one of a number of important emotions that you experience on a daily basis and that have important effects on the way you think and behave. Most importantly, anxiety is an emotion that can have beneficial effects (making you alert and focused when faced with potential challenges) or it can be debilitating and distressing if it takes over your life and feels uncontrollable.

In this chapter we lay the foundations for a thorough understanding of anxiety. We explain what exactly anxiety is, and why and how you experience it. We determine when it is that anxiety becomes a problem, and seems to control you. Finally, we introduce you to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): what it is, and how it can help you.

## *Understanding the Basics of Anxiety*

Everyone experiences many emotions on a daily basis. In this section we look at some of those emotions, including anxiety, and explain that emotions – even anxiety – can be useful when experienced at the right time and in the right amount.

### *Knowing that anxiety is a normal, and useful, emotion*

Your feelings have evolved to serve adaptive purposes and, in most cases, they help you to solve problems that you encounter. Here are some important emotions that you experience pretty much daily:

- ✔ Anger in response to feeling challenged or thwarted.
- ✔ Anxiety in response to anticipated threats.
- ✔ Disgust in response to repulsive or sickening things or events.
- ✔ Fear in response to immediate perceived threats.
- ✔ Happiness/joy in response to things that you find positive or rewarding.
- ✔ Sadness/sorrow in response to losses or failures you experience.

In general, positive emotions like joy make you feel good (because you associate them with achievement and reward) and negative emotions like anger tend to feel unpleasant (because you associate them with threats, challenges and losses). Nevertheless, the significance of all emotions is that they help you react to, adapt to and deal more successfully with these various types of life events.

So in the case of anxiety, most people are willing to put up with the unpleasant feeling that anxiety gives them because the emotion helps them to deal more effectively with the threats and challenges they face in day-to-day life. Yes, we're talking about a positive side to anxiety. Table 1-1 provides everyday examples of the advantages of the emotion.

<b><i>Threat or Challenge</i></b>	<b><i>Benefits of Anxiety</i></b>
Preparing for an interview	Feeling a bit anxious makes you focus on the interview and provides a level of arousal that ensures that you're motivated and alert to answer questions.
Meeting an important person for the first time (for example on a date)	Normal levels of anxiety enable you to think through a few of the things that might happen during the meeting and prepare yourself to deal with these possibilities.
Finding your bank balance is overdrawn	A bit of anxiety focuses you on the problem and helps you to problem-solve how you could get your bank balance back into the black.

## *Appreciating the purpose of anxiety*

To survive as living organisms, people must be able to effectively deal with all those things in the world that are likely to pose threats to survival. Many unsophisticated organisms survive by having biologically pre-wired responses to basic threats. Humans too have some responses they're born with that help them to deal with potential threats. For example, people have pre-wired startle responses that make them suddenly alert to the kinds of things that might signal threats. People are startled by:

- ✔ Sudden loud noises.
- ✔ Looming shadows.
- ✔ Rapid movement of things towards them.
- ✔ Rapid, unpredictable movements around them.
- ✔ Staring eyes.

Interestingly, all these things that startle people are also characteristic of potential predators, so the startle response is a primitive one designed to make you alert to, and avoid, physical threat. However, the modern world is made up of many more potential threats and challenges than this, so people

have evolved a more flexible system to help them deal with the vast range of threats and challenges that confront them during a normal lifetime. This situation is where anxiety and its various elements comes in as a means of helping you to deal with anything that you've labelled as threatening.

So, if you've thought about something and decided – for whatever reason – that it's potentially threatening, you begin to experience anxiety as an emotion that helps you deal with this perceived threat by making you more alert and focused.



The more things you interpret as threatening, the more anxiety you experience. So, the more you tend to interpret events as threats, the more anxious you feel.

## *Experiencing anxiety*

You experience anxiety in a variety of ways:

- ✓ **Feelings:** You experience an unpleasant feeling of apprehension (as if you're under threat).
- ✓ **Bodily sensations:** You may have tense muscles and a dry mouth, a shirt stuck to you with sweat, and be trembling and struggling to swallow.
- ✓ **Physiological changes:** Your heart beats faster, you feel more alert and vigilant, and your reactions are faster.
- ✓ **Behaviours:** You want to avoid the source of what's making you anxious.
- ✓ **Thoughts:** Perhaps paradoxically (given how unpleasant anxiety can make you feel), anxiety makes you think more closely and more directly about threats and challenges. Anxiety can affect your thinking by:
  - **Controlling your attention:** Anxiety forces you to focus on things that may be threatening or problematic.
  - **Determining how you interpret things:** If something could be good or bad, anxiety compels you to adopt the bad interpretation.

- **Affecting your reasoning:** Anxiety makes you search for reasons that things might be bad or problematic.
- **Making you think that things are worse than they really are:** This *catastrophising* causes you to make mountains out of molehills.
- **Making you expect bad things happening:** You think life will hand you lemons more often than in fact it does.

The relationship between anxiety and thinking works both ways – anxiety can affect the way you think, but the way you think can also cause you to feel anxious. So if you're not careful, the interaction between thoughts and feelings can spiral out of control and leave you with distressing levels of anxiety.



All these elements form the basis of *normally experienced anxiety*. As we emphasise throughout this book, normally experienced anxiety is an unpleasant feeling, but in most cases is a short-lived experience and one that's a common reaction to future threats and challenges. In proper amounts, normally experienced anxiety is adaptive and beneficial.

## *Knowing When Anxiety Becomes a Problem*

Anxiety is an emotion that serves a purpose in specific situations. Even though anxiety isn't necessarily a pleasant experience, most people can usually control it. They turn on the emotion when necessary, and then turn it off when they no longer need it. But some people lose their ability to manage their anxiety, and it begins to become a regular unpleasant experience. Anxiety becomes a relatively pervasive emotion that they experience on a regular basis, from waking up in the morning to going to bed at night.

So how does anxiety change from being a benefit to a problem?

## *Seeing how anxiety takes over*

A number of factors can make your anxiety seem uncontrollable:

- ✔ **Awareness:** You become overly aware of your feelings of anxiety when they occur and focus on them to the point where this attention to the feelings just makes them feel worse.
- ✔ **Rules and beliefs:** You develop rules and beliefs that you must do certain things when you encounter something that's threatening or challenging, and these act to maintain anxiety. Examples include:
  - 'Worry is a necessary thing to do.'
  - 'I must resolve all uncertainty.'
  - 'If anything bad happens it will be my fault, so I must try to ensure that nothing bad ever happens.'

We discuss breaking out of these limiting rules and beliefs in Chapter 7.

- ✔ **Strategies:** You develop strategies and responses to try to prevent anxiety occurring – for example, repeatedly checking that things are okay and avoiding things that make you feel anxious. But your attempts to prevent anxiety occurring only reinforce your view that anxiety is both bad and still uncontrollable. Head to Chapter 4 for pointers on putting yourself in situations you've been avoiding.
- ✔ **Stress:** If you're experiencing stress (for example, at work, at home or in relationships), you find it more difficult to exert control over your feelings of anxiety and to switch anxiety off.
- ✔ **Thought patterns:** You may develop ways of thinking about threats and challenges that just makes them seem worse rather than better. For example, you only think through all the bad things that could happen rather than thinking through how to resolve the problem. We look at understanding and dealing with catastrophic thinking in Chapter 6.

You can see that relatively few of these examples of how anxiety can come to feel uncontrollable relate to external events and experiences. Most relate to the way you think about the things that might be threats or challenges in your life and how you try to deal with them and the anxiety they cause.

## *Looking at types of anxiety problems*

When anxiety becomes a problem, it can manifest itself in a number of specific and very different ways, each of which is distressing to the individual who suffers from the symptoms. We don't yet fully understand why some people develop one type of anxiety symptom rather than another, but these various symptoms form the basis for the main anxiety problems that people experience:

- ✔ **Chronic worrying:** Chronic, apparently uncontrollable worrying forms the basis for the diagnostic category known as *generalised anxiety disorder*. People who experience chronic worrying direct their worrying not only at major life issues (health, finances and so on) but also at many minor day-to-day issues that most people don't find problematic (a minor news item, a small mark on the carpet and so on). Chronic worrying is distressing because sufferers feel the need to worry, but find their worrying difficult to manage – they can't just turn it on and switch it off. They tend to catastrophise what they worry about, and end up turning even minor problems into major ones. We give guidance for dealing with chronic worry in Chapter 6.
- ✔ **Compulsions and rituals:** For some people, anxiety is associated with the need to indulge in compulsive or ritualistic behaviours that the individual believes will terminate or prevent anxiety. Common forms of compulsive behaviour include the following:
  - Compulsive checking, to ensure that bad things won't happen.
  - Compulsive washing/cleaning, to ensure that the person won't become contaminated or ill.

- Superstitious stereotyped sequences of behaviours – for example, touching the light switch ten times before switching it off.
- Superstitious arranging of objects – for example, making sure that ornaments on the mantelpiece are in their correct places.

Compulsions are distressing because people feel that they're compelled to do them, and they may become very distressed if they're prevented from enacting their compulsions and rituals when they feel they need to.

✔ **Obsessive thoughts:** Anxiety can cause intrusive and recurring thoughts about:

- Real future threats or challenges that the individual finds particularly aversive – for example, going to the dentist or sitting an exam.
- Thinking, doing or saying something that the person finds disturbing – for example, causing harm to a loved one or doing or saying something inappropriate and embarrassing.

✔ **Panic:** Some people experience anxiety in the form of regular, recurring *panic attacks* – intense and sudden periods of discomfort characterised by palpitations, sweating, trembling, dizziness and feelings of depersonalisation (feeling that you're outside of your body looking at yourself) and losing control. Panic attacks become a problem when they're very regular and disrupt people's ability to live their normal daily life. For the sufferer, these regular attacks are frightening and distressing.

✔ **Specific phobias:** Some people develop specific *phobias*: anxieties only around specific objects and events. Common examples of specific phobias are fears of small animals (such as spiders, insects, invertebrates, rodents and snakes), heights, water, blood and enclosed spaces (such as lifts). The anxiety caused by these fears is usually well out of proportion to the threat that these objects and situations pose, but the fears can result in distress and disruption of normal daily living if they become very severe. Flick to Chapter 4 for more information on dealing with severe fears.



## Developing the Ability to Manage Your Anxiety



CBT is a proven, evidence-based way of helping you to alleviate your anxiety. The C stands for *cognitive*, which primarily relates to what you think, and the B stands for *behavioural*, which relates to what you do. CBT explains how what you think and do interacts with your feelings of anxiety to keep them going and make them worse. And, crucially, CBT provides ways of reducing anxiety through changing what you think and do.

### Exploring the role of anxious thoughts

Try the following activity that explores the role of thinking in relation to anxiety. If it helps, you may want to close your eyes (but only after you've read this activity first!).



Imagine that you're visiting a doctor because you're experiencing an unexplained pain in your foot. You respect and trust this doctor and know that she'll take her time to reach the correct diagnosis. After a series of tests, she tells you that you've no reason to be concerned; you don't have a serious illness. Rather, she explains, you've a bruised tendon that will begin to heal within the next week or so, provided you don't overexert yourself. How do you feel at the end of this consultation?

Now repeat the process of imagining visiting a doctor because of foot pain. The level and location of the pain is identical to that in the previous scenario, and your trusted doctor runs the same tests. This time, however, the news isn't so good. The doctor returns looking worried. She explains that she isn't yet sure what's wrong, but is concerned enough to urgently refer you to a specialist for further tests. How do you feel at the end of this consultation?

Probably, you imagined feeling relieved at the end of the first scenario and anxious at the end of the second. Given that the pain is the same in both cases, what leads to the different feelings?

Well, the different reactions of the doctor mean that you're likely to *think* differently about the pain in the two scenarios. In the first you may have thoughts like 'the pain isn't serious', which lead you to feel relieved. In the second you probably have more fearful thoughts, such as 'something may be seriously wrong with me', which lead you to feel anxious.



A key principle of CBT is that thoughts affect how you feel, and fearful or worrying thoughts can lead you to feel anxious.

Sometimes, your fearful thoughts are realistic. However, more often than not, your fearful thoughts don't accurately reflect the reality of the situation. Rather, the thoughts:

- ✔ Overestimate the likelihood of the feared outcome.
- ✔ Overestimate the awfulness of the feared outcome.
- ✔ Underestimate your ability to cope if the feared outcome happens.

For example, if you're anxious about making a mistake at work, you may:

- ✔ Think that you're very likely to make a mistake, when in fact you usually don't make them.
- ✔ Think that the consequence of a mistake would be losing your job, when in fact this loss is very unlikely.
- ✔ Think that you wouldn't be able to cope if you made a mistake, when in fact you'd probably manage the situation well and correct the error.

In this book we use the phrase 'coping with the feared outcome' to refer to your ability to successfully manage things should your fears come to pass.



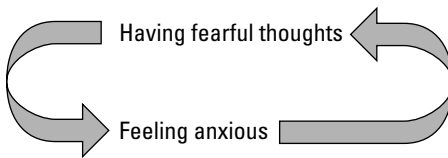
Unrealistic fears occur because of the second principle of CBT: feelings bias your thinking, and feelings of anxiety can lead you to have more fearful thoughts and to pay attention to more anxiety-provoking things.



If you're not immediately convinced by this second principle, try to recall two times when you thought about the same issue, once when you were feeling calm and once when you were feeling anxious. Then take a few moments to reflect on

any differences between what you thought about the issue in the two cases. The chances are that you had more fearful and worrying thoughts about the issue when you were feeling anxious than when you were feeling calm. Feelings biased your thinking.

The combination of the two principles means a circular relationship can develop between fearful thoughts and anxious feelings, as illustrated in Figure 1-1. Unfortunately, you can get stuck in a vicious cycle of increasing fear and anxiety.



**Figure 1-1:** The relationship between fearful thoughts and anxious feelings.

## The Anxiety Equation

For those who have a mathematical bent, Aaron Beck and others developed an Anxiety Equation, which provides a useful summary of the types of thoughts that contribute to anxiety.

The anxiety equation combines three ideas:

1. The more likely you think a feared outcome is, the more anxious you feel.
2. The more awful you think a feared outcome is, the more anxious you feel.
3. The better you think you can cope with a feared outcome, the less anxious you feel in relation to that outcome.

Combining these three you get:

$$\text{Level of anxiety} = \frac{\text{Perceived likelihood} \times \text{Perceived awfulness}}{\text{Perceived ability to cope}}$$

So your anxiety increases as your estimate of the likelihood of the feared outcome increases and as your perception of the awfulness of the feared outcome increases. It decreases as your estimate of your ability to cope increases.

If you're someone who tends to visualise things, you may experience some anxious thoughts in the form of mental images. For example, you may see a mental image of what you fear will go wrong. As with other types of anxious thoughts, images can increase feelings of anxiety, which in turn can lead to more anxiety-related images and thoughts.

Given that anxious thoughts often contribute to your anxiety by exaggerating the risks you face, one way that CBT can help reduce anxiety is through re-evaluating these thoughts. In the following chapters we explain a range of CBT techniques that help you re-evaluate your anxious thoughts and replace them with more realistic and helpful ones.

In essence, the CBT techniques help you to identify when your anxious thoughts are exaggerating the level of risk, and to develop more helpful thoughts that provide a more realistic assessment of the risk. These new thoughts are most likely to be less anxiety provoking, leading to a reduction in your level of anxiety.



When reading about and applying CBT techniques, don't blame or criticise yourself for having anxious thoughts that exaggerate the level of risk. Everyone has such thoughts when they feel anxious or stressed – having them is a normal human process.

## *Changing your behaviour*

Understanding how your behaviour contributes to anxiety is of crucial importance.

Usually, when you feel anxious, you do things to try to keep yourself, and perhaps others, safe. Examples of such *safety behaviours* include:

- ✓ Regularly visiting a doctor, if you're continually worried that you're ill.
- ✓ Rushing through a presentation you're giving in order to finish it quicker, in the belief that rushing reduces the chances of you making a highly embarrassing mistake.
- ✓ Sitting or lying down when you feel your heart racing, in the hope that doing so puts less strain on your body and so means that you don't suffer the heart attack you fear.

Safety behaviours also include avoiding the anxiety-provoking situation altogether. Here are some examples of avoidance:

- ✔ Not leaving the house, if you fear you'll be laughed at and humiliated by others if you do.
- ✔ Not driving a car, if you think that a car crash is likely.
- ✔ Not using lifts, if you're afraid you'll become trapped in one.

Sometimes avoidance can mean that you rarely feel anxious, because you're so infrequently in the feared situation. However, avoidance is far from an ideal solution, because it can severely limit your life and may not always be possible.



Although safety behaviours (including avoidance) are a normal and understandable response to anxiety, they can maintain and worsen anxiety problems. Safety behaviours can prevent you from engaging in new learning about the things you fear.



Craig strongly believes that he'll be attacked if he leaves his home, so he stays at home day after day after day. Because Craig avoids leaving his home, he never has an opportunity to see whether his perception of the risk is accurate or excessive. And so the fear remains.

In contrast, if you *don't* engage in safety behaviours, several things can happen:

- ✔ Because fears tend to significantly exaggerate the level of risk, you may find that the feared outcome doesn't come to pass or, if it does, that it's much less awful than you imagined.
- ✔ Feelings of anxiety gradually diminish as you remain in the feared situation, because the level of danger is lower.
- ✔ You realise that your anxious thoughts have exaggerated the level of risk. This realisation reduces your strength of belief in these thoughts and provides convincing evidence for the development of more realistic thoughts. And this shift in thinking helps you feel less anxious.

CBT reduces anxiety by supporting you to face what you fear without safety behaviours.



At this point you may be thinking that CBT isn't for you, and the prospect of facing your fears may seem impossible or dangerous. Don't worry. The CBT techniques we describe in the following chapters help you assess whether your estimate of the level of risk is exaggerated and so whether facing your fears is likely to be safe. And you can manage the process of facing your fears in a gradual way that's under your control.