

Understanding Stress and Anxiety

Life is full of stressful situations. Work, finances, and family relationships can throw up situations that make us feel tense, worried, or struggling to get to sleep at night.

As we will see below, the stress response is natural and a key part of how we've evolved to survive. However, there are situations where the stress response can become a problem:

- **Responding with stress in non-threatening situations:** Sometimes, our stress response can be overactive and kick in at the very thought of something. Someone with a phobia of spiders might start to feel their heart start to race just by thinking about them. Or we might find ourselves constantly worrying over something that isn't going to happen for a very long time.
- **Long-term stress:** We might deal with so many stresses in life that we notice long-term symptoms, such as poor sleep, fatigue, muscle tension, high blood pressure or stomach aches.

In both of these situations, our natural stress response has started to work against us – it's getting in the way of our daily lives, making us experience unpleasant sensations, and sometimes causes us to avoid situations altogether.

If this is the case for you, then this guide is here to help. It looks at what you can do to take control of the things that are worrying you by tackling the symptoms of anxiety, and problem-solving the stressors in your life.

But to do this, it's important to understand why we feel anxious and recognise the stress response within us.

Understanding the stress response

Historically, the main thing we had to fear as humans was coming face-to-face with a predator. These days, the things that worry us aren't quite as tangible, but they cause us to have the same response. It might be a presentation at work, having to catch a train on time, juggling our job and family responsibilities, or uncertainty over the health of a loved one. We can think of these things as **stresses**.

When we come face to face with a threat – whether it's real or just imagined – our body's "stress response" kicks in. This is designed to prepare and protect us from immediate danger – so it happens extremely quickly, before we have had a chance to think rationally about the problem before us.

In the short term, the stress response raises our blood pressure, makes us more alert, increases our focus, and gives us a burst of energy that allows us to act quickly – and even perform incredible feats of strength we're not usually capable of.

This response is designed to be helpful in the short term. It can help us perform our best in a sporting event, musical performance, or even defend ourselves in an argument.

The problem, as mentioned before, is when this response kicks in too often, either because we're under a lot of stress on an ongoing basis, or we've become hyper-reactive to our own thoughts. Over the long-term, this can lead us to experiencing symptoms and patterns of behaviour and thought that aren't helpful at all.

Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is a common response to a significant amount of stress, whether it's a particularly intense period of stress or a longer period of low-level stress. Anxiety can affect us in many ways, sometimes in ways we don't notice. You might be experiencing:

- **Cognitive Symptoms** – such as reduced concentration, efficiency, and productivity, poor judgement, 'brain fog', indecision and self-doubt.
- **Emotional symptoms** – such as sadness, irritability and anger, cynicism, and frustration
- **Physical Symptoms** – such as a racing heart rate, tension headaches, jaw clenching, muscle spasms, frequent colds, indigestion, stomach aches, or diarrhoea
- **Behavioural symptoms** – such as increased use of alcohol or tobacco, withdrawal from others, disrupted sleep patterns, loss of sense of humour, or interpersonal problems like frequent arguments with family members.

These symptoms can have a significant impact on your quality of life if they affect you on a day to day basis. Anxiety can also cause you to avoid certain situations or actions that would bring on the symptoms, limiting what you're able to do.

The good thing is that these symptoms can be overcome – and there are strategies you can that will help you manage stressful situations more effectively.

Identifying your stressors

Now that you understand how the stress response works and how to recognise the symptoms of anxiety, it's time to look at your own situation. Before you can start to tackle the symptoms of anxiety, you need to understand what triggers them.

To do this, you'll need to start keeping a diary. Whenever you're feeling anxious or worried, note down the following:

- any symptoms you're feeling – particularly physical symptoms
- what's going through your mind – what are you thinking?
- what did you do to cope?

If you keep a diary for around two weeks, you'll quickly build up a picture of what triggers your stress response, how it affects you, and what coping strategies you already have. You'll gradually be able to assess whether these coping strategies are good for you or whether you can replace them with better ones, as you read more of our guide.

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