

## Anxiety

### About anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety at various times in their lives. Anxiety is a term used to describe the thoughts and feelings we get when we are frightened, worried or stressed. We feel anxiety in different parts of our bodies due to the effects of the hormone adrenaline.

Adrenaline is produced to increase our body's response to danger or physical challenge. This effect is sometimes called the 'fight or flight response'. The boost of adrenaline transforms us into 'super humans' for a short period of time and gives us the extra energy to escape danger or overcome a challenge. Adrenaline produces some of the following effects:

- It increases our heart rate and breathing to get more blood to our muscles in case we have to fight or run away. We feel this as a fast and pounding heart and shortness of breath.
- It reduces the blood flow to parts of our body not immediately needed to meet the challenge e.g. our bladder and bowel. We feel this as a need to visit the toilet more frequently. It can sometimes lead to diarrhoea or constipation.
- It reduces blood to our hands and feet to reduce bleeding if we are injured in a fight. We feel this as cold or tingling hands and feet.
- The changes in blood flow around our body can sometime reduce the amount of oxygen getting to our brain leading to us feeling light headed, dizzy or even faint.
- It increases the activity of the stomach to get food energy to our brain and muscles. Our overactive or churning stomach is felt as butterflies in our stomach.
- It reduces our secretions so that we don't choke during our exertion. This is why we experience a dry mouth.
- It increases sweating to cool us down in anticipation of physical exertion. We experience this as cold sweats.
- It tenses our muscles in anticipation of the sudden exertion needed to fight or run away. We experience this as sore or tense muscles.
- We also become very alert to danger. This is experienced as being over aware of risks and seeing danger and threat in everything.

Sometimes we can enjoy the effects of fear and adrenaline as long as we understand and have control over its cause. For example, when we watch a scary or exciting movie; go on a frightening fairground ride or watch a thrilling sport.

Anxiety can also be experienced as worry and stress. Worry is a thought rather than a feeling. Anxious thoughts are those that tend to be about threats of overcoming danger or failure.

They can sometimes get stuck in our heads, going round and round, exaggerating how difficult or threatening a situation is. The reason for this may be to make sure we are not complacent about risk or danger. Thinking about past difficulties and failures may be to get us to avoid past mistakes.

Anxiety is very useful when we are facing real threats or challenges, but if the threat disappears or the risk is low or only in our head and we continue to worry and produce adrenaline we can become very uncomfortable and even unwell. Anxiety that goes on too long or happens too often can interfere with our ability to enjoy life and deal with normal activities. This is often referred to as irrational anxiety or stress.

Up to one in five young people experience regular anxiety and stress. In young people, anxiety can present in many ways including excessive worrying, stress, phobias, panic attacks, school refusal and clinginess or separation anxiety.