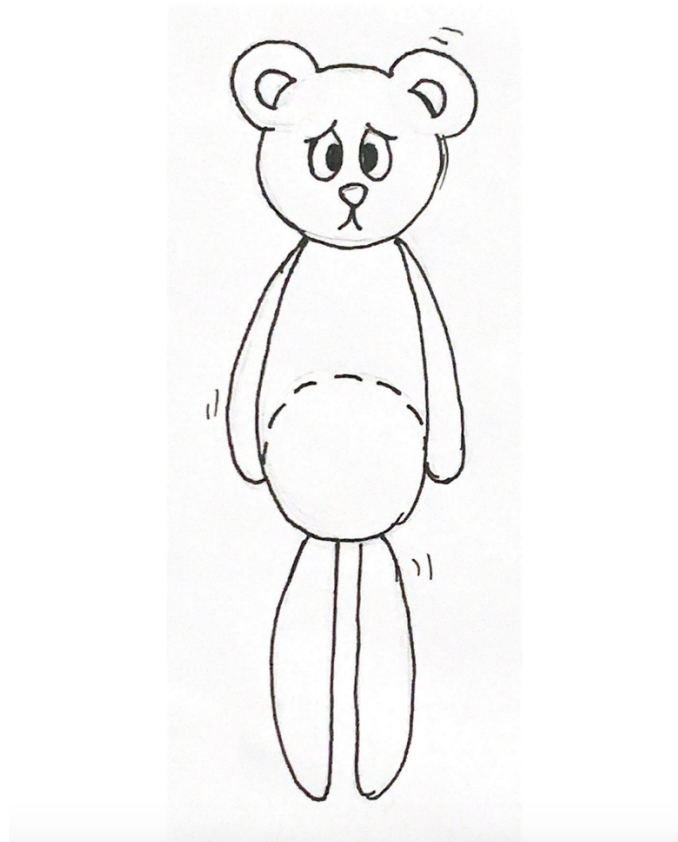


Practical Psychology for Everyday Life

A series of short books about managing life dilemmas

This thing called anxiety and what to do about it



Dr Stewart Hase

Stewarthase.com

This thing called anxiety and what to do about it

This little book is about anxiety, which affects up to 25% of the population at one time or another to the extent that they need treatment.

Here, we look at the nature of anxiety, it's different forms and, most importantly, what to do about it.

There are lots of therapies used to treat anxiety and we will not be going into these in this book. Rather, we are looking mainly at self-help strategies that psychologists teach their clients so that they can manage their anxiety.

I hope you find the information and tips useful.

Dr Stewart Hase

Drawings by Madison Mitchell

What's anxiety?

Before we start talking about anxiety, and not wanting to worry you, I'd like to make it clear right from the start that anxiety is very treatable. We'll come to the treatment later but if you'd like, you can skip the next bit and go straight there (page 5). It's up to you.

Like all animals, we are designed to respond to danger, by flight or fight. It enables us to survive in a, sometimes, hostile world. It involves, an increased heart rate, faster breathing, being alert and ready for action, tension, and having heightened senses. This all goes away when the threat has passed and is a normal stress response. Its purpose is to help us survive danger.

Danger is meant to be short lived. We either run away from it or fight it, using the energy obtained from the stress response mentioned above. Our body then returns to normal quite quickly.

Anxiety is the same feeling but there is no real or obvious threat and it doesn't go away. It's like a shadow in the background. It interferes with our sleeping, thoughts race, we feel on edge all the time, we get irritable with people, we feel like avoiding people and things, we eat too little or too much, alcohol consumption increases, and we feel tired all the time, for example.

Anxious people think anxious thoughts. They expect the worst and become anxious even before they attempt something such as sitting an exam, going for a job interview, having a medical procedure and so on. We call this catastrophising. We can even anticipate getting anxious about some event-so we do get anxious. Anxiety about anxiety.

Sometimes people experience extreme anxiety or panic attacks. These can be the result of a fear, such as being in an enclosed space or heights, for example. Sometimes, when we are suffering from anxiety, we might have a panic attack when we feel overwhelmed.

Panic attacks are so unpleasant and frightening that when we have had one, they might start occurring out of the blue, even when we are asleep, shopping in the supermarket or just driving the car. The main reason for this is that any anxious symptom, such as over-breathing or breathing too shallowly (hyperventilation) can bring on a panic attack. Even feeling dizzy or light-headed can cause one.

Panic attacks are characterised by a rapid heart rate that we might feel in our chest (palpitations), breathing fast, feeling like something really bad is going to happen, feeling like we'd like to escape from where we are, dizziness, and a feeling as if you are watching the world on a film or video.

Anxiety can run in families and we can inherit an anxious gene. We can learn to be anxious from our childhood and adult experiences, and it can involve a mixture of both. That is, the gene is present and we have a bad experience, such as a relationship breakdown or a car accident, and we become anxious as a result.

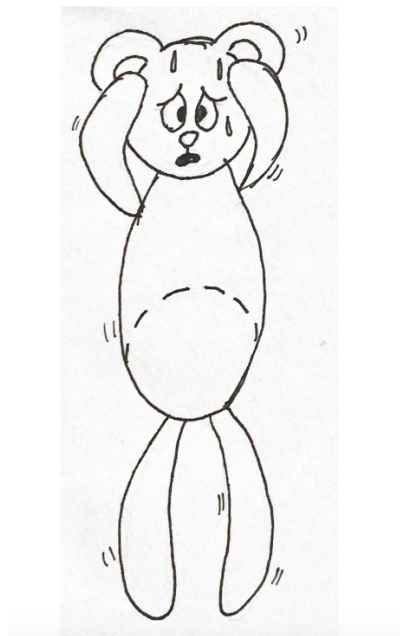
Determining the cause of anxiety is useful in terms of treatment. If a person has the gene, since it appears to run in their family, and have been anxious a lot of their life, even as a child, then there are important lifestyle issues to consider that can be used throughout life to ward off anxiety-to control it.

Some people are lucky and might only experience transient anxiety due to a life event such as a death in the family or other traumatic experience. The anxiety goes away after a short period of time.

How do I know if I have anxiety?

Anxiety is often indicated by a combination of the following over a few weeks:

- Sleep problems-either falling asleep or waking up in the middle of the night. Sufferers report having racing thoughts, feeling alert and restlessness.
- Feeling nervous, tense, on edge all the time and alert-as if something bad is going to happen.
- Worrying excessively about things and not being able to control the worry.
- Fatigue.
- Irritability-a short fuse that can sometimes turn into anger.
- Difficulty in concentrating, forgetting things, not being able to deal with problems.
- Avoiding things that might cause anxiety such as going out of the house, going to the supermarket, crowds, going to the movies.
- Physical symptoms such as fast heart rate, breathing too quickly, feeling as if you're not getting enough oxygen, gastro-intestinal problems.
- Weight loss or overeating.
- Excessive use of alcohol-this can also be a cause of anxiety.



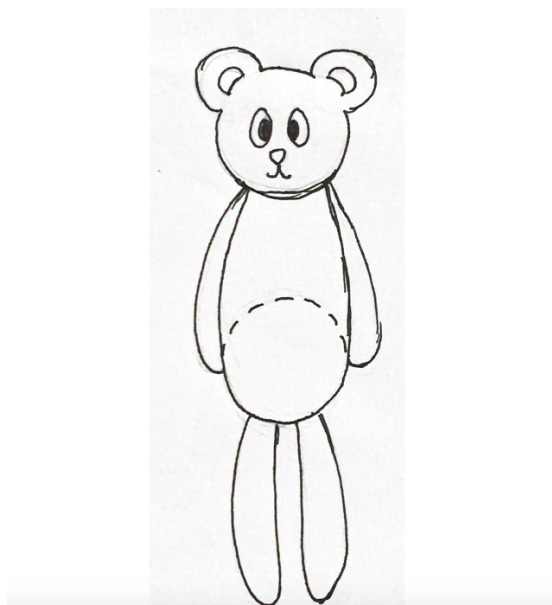
Are there different types of anxiety?

The most common form of anxiety is GAD or Generalised Anxiety Disorder. As mentioned above, this can be short-lived or be a life-time illness.

Panic Disorder means that a person is having regular panic attacks and has been doing so persistently for a couple of weeks or more. Early intervention is very effective.

Phobias involve severe anxiety, usually a panic attack, over a specific thing or experiences such as spiders, snakes, heights, enclosed spaces, being outdoors, separation anxiety and social situations, for example.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is an anxiety disorder. People suffering from this have thoughts that won't go away and have rituals or compulsions that are actions, which reduce the anxiety. A compulsion might involve checking that doors are locked five times before going to bed.



What is the difference between anxiety and depression?

Depression involves a disorder of mood. Typically, the person is sad most of the time, feels unmotivated to do anything, and withdrawn, has a loss of energy, sleeping too much and feels hopeless and worthless. Depressed people share some of the symptoms of anxiety such as sleep disturbance, not being able to concentrate, irritability and using alcohol or other drugs.

Sometimes people become depressed due to not being able to cope with their anxiety. Others experience both. But they can exist without each other. That is, anxious people may not have depression and depressed people are not necessarily anxious.

Beating anxiety

One of the great things about anxiety is that it is very treatable. There are some very simple things you can do to control even very scary experiences such as Panic Attacks.

There are two aspects to beating anxiety.

The first is to control the body-the physical response to threat.

The second is to change the triggers that create the anxiety in the first place.

Let's start with controlling the body and actively reducing the anxiety.

- Breathing. Most adults don't know how to breath properly. We tend to breathe too fast and too shallow.

Slowing the breathing has the direct effect of slowing the body down-it counteracts the anxiety response.

There are lots of breathing methods. My favourite is:

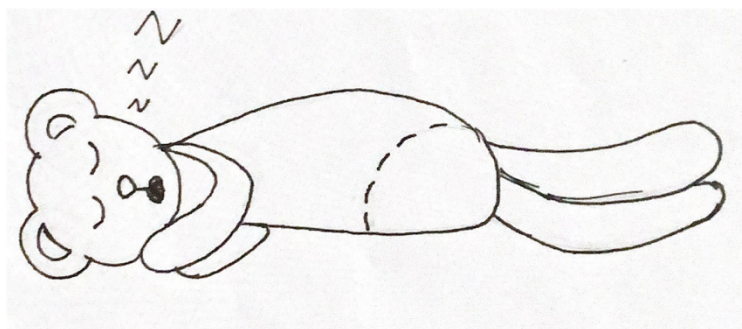
Breathe in and out through the nose (unless you have sinus problems) and take normal breaths, not deep ones. As you breathe in count (in your head) 1,2 and Pause for 3,4. As you breathe out count 5,6,7 and Pause for 8,9. Yes, you breathe out longer than you breathe in.

Repeat

- Learn a relaxation method such as Progressive Muscle Relaxation or learn meditation. There is lots of evidence that shows how relaxation and/or meditation can reduce anxiety dramatically. One of the best meditation sites is Calm, which you can download to your phone. Email me at stewart.hase@gmail.com and I can send you a really good relaxation recording that is easy to follow and learn.



- Once you can relax, your psychologist can teach you some really clever ways to smash anxiety such as anchoring, for example. A simple anchor is, when fully relaxed, saying the word Relax (in your mind, not out loud) as you breathe out. Do this for around 5 minutes or more. Then, when anxious you can simply breathe out and say 'Relax' and your brain and body will remember how to relax.
- Try and get at least 6 hours of sleep per night. Using your breathing and relaxation technique can really help. If you have trouble sleeping, have a look at the Sleep Cure appended to this little booklet.



- Exercise. There is no doubt that exercise has positive effects on the brain and on reducing anxiety and stress. Walking one hour a day, as briskly as you can, is recommended and this can become a lifelong habit. Isometric exercise (weight-lifting) can be as effective as aerobic exercise if the heart rate is raised and there are enough repetitions.



- Stop or reduce drinking alcohol to no more than 2 standard drinks per day with at least 2 days with no alcohol per week. Alcohol increases anxiety and interferes with sleep.
- Enhance your relationships.
- Do nice things that you like doing. Don't just think about it, do it. Scheduling nice things into your life can be a real anxiety buster.
- Controlling panic attacks involves two things. First, start breathing slowly using the method above. Second, recognise that panic attacks are not dangerous, are simply a rush of adrenaline and say that to yourself. Don't fear them. Tell them to get worse, challenge them to really overwhelm you. Sounds strange but it really works-fear of panic makes it worse. Just ignoring them and breathing through them while you get on with whatever you are doing defuses them.

Now, changing your thinking

The other, perhaps more complicated part of managing anxiety is controlling our thoughts.

Our thoughts tend to be automatic or habitual. Anxious people tend to think anxious thoughts that stimulates the fight or flight response in the brain.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves two things. The first is to recognise how we are feeling and thinking. We tend to be focused too much on what might have just happened and what might happen in the future. So, we are not focused on the present.

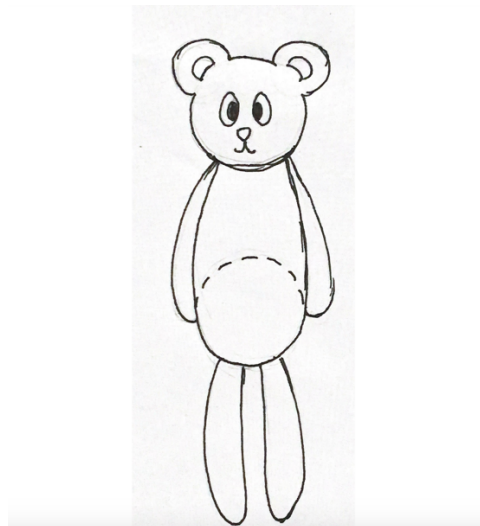
Our brain tends to be reactive rather than purposeful to conserve energy. These are called habits.

A habitual behaviour involves two components: a trigger (something that happens) and a response. For example, you have had a bad day at work, you are tired and stressed. You get home and the kids are making a lot of noise, playing with their friends. You get angry, shout at them to send their friends home and send your children to their rooms. Your spouse tells you that you are over-reacting and to calm down. You shout at your spouse and tell them that they need to support you rather than criticise. You disappear into your office and fume.

An alternative is to: recognise before getting home that you are stressed and there is a risk that you might over-react to any more stress. So, you go for a walk before going into the house and calm down. Or you go inside, tell your spouse that you are really stressed and talk about it. Or tell them that you are going to sit in the garden for a while and calm down. Result-no further stress and you don't create distress for others.

Mindfulness places two additional steps in the way of a habitual response. The first is to recognise the trigger and how you are feeling. Next would be to decide to change your response and then just breathe, as above. Once you do this, the response is no longer automatic.

Another anxiety related example. You get anxious when going to the supermarket or anywhere there are groups of people. You start to avoid going out. So, you recognise what is happening and learn to breathe to control your feelings and force yourself to go out for short bursts initially and gradually lengthening the time.



One simple anxiety management technique involves the following mindfulness approach:

Thought stopping-the circuit breaker

We automatically go from trigger to action. In fact, most of our behaviour involves an ingrained habit. This technique involves putting in place a circuit breaker so that we don't go straight from trigger to action.

- The key to mindfulness is monitoring yourself. That is, being aware of how you are feeling and/or thinking at any one time.
- Identify the negative thought or feeling immediately it occurs.
- Grab the thought or feeling and throw it out of your mind. Tell yourself that it is a part of the old script and is no longer wanted. Say STOP (to yourself, not out loud) if you need to. Then replace the thought with something more positive, an affirmation or a pleasant idea.

- Then abdominally breathe, slowly-see below.
- Congratulate yourself.
- Be persistent because the negative thought or feeling will return.
- After a while this will become automatic and you won't even have to think about it. It is essentially a reversal of habit which takes about 3 months, according to research

STOP also stands for: S-Stop, T-Take a breath, O-Observe your thoughts and feelings, P-Proceed once relaxed.

The white and black parrots

Imagine there is a white parrot on your left shoulder and a black parrot on your right. The black parrot tells you all the things you shouldn't do because they make you anxious, tells you that your anxiety is bad and to be avoided. The white parrot tells you that anxiety is not dangerous, that you can breathe through it, that your new skills will help you. It tells you to 'do' rather than 'not do'.

The black dog

Most people are aware of the black dog. It was Winston Churchill's name for his depression. But your black dog can be anxiety, alcohol abuse-anything. Most of us hate our black dogs and want them to go away. We wish them to be gone. We hate them.

Wishing them away doesn't work. More effective is to acknowledge the dog, accept it is there. But we put it on a leash:

- We control it, rather than it controlling us and use the techniques we have learned to pull the leash in.

Thought diffusion

I think one of the most brilliant psychotherapy techniques of the last 10 years has been the idea that a thought is only real once you make it real. In other words, thoughts are just thoughts-we don't have to act on them or even listen to them.

Recognise that the thought is probably trying to help you-protect you and is often a part of our past-our little, younger self. It is useful to thank the thought but tell it that the adult self is going to take over-using our new approaches to managing ourselves.

Have a conversation with yourself about options rather than reacting to a thought.

