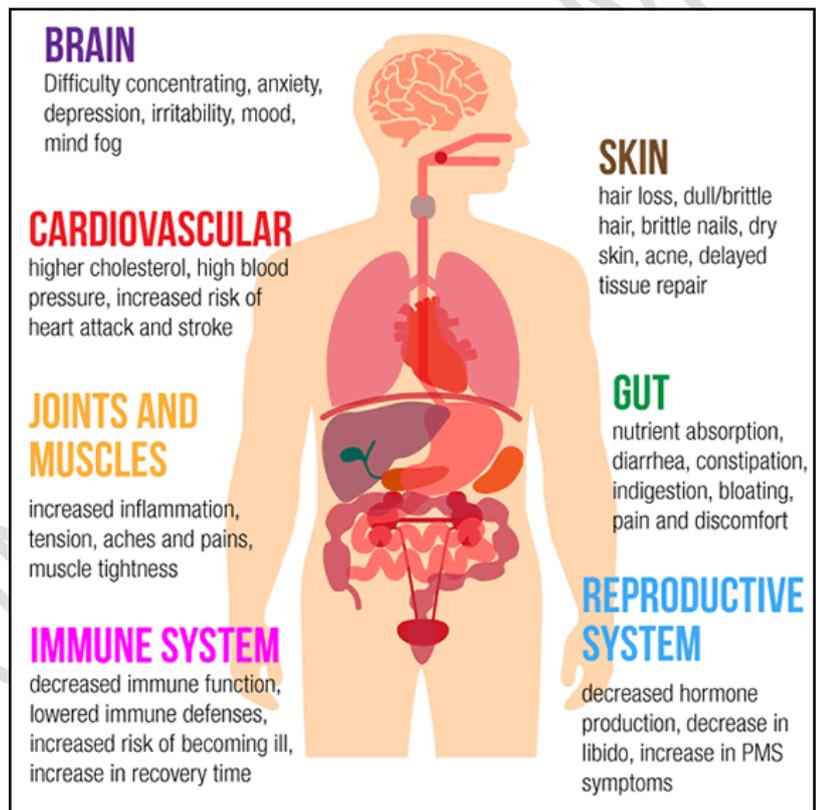




Anxiety

We need and are hard wired for anxiety, fears, and worries as they help us survive and keep safe; when we sense danger this triggers hormone release that cause physical and mental reactions that prime our bodies for action (*fight*, take on a challenge; *flight*, get away from danger; *fright*, cautious watchfulness) and when danger passes the changes subside. Whilst anxiety starts in the brain (thalamus and amygdala), it causes *bodily changes* which increase readiness to act, *psychological changes* which provides focus, alertness, or even numbness to act, and *behavioural changes* which are our array of responses in actions.

For instance, physical responses may include tensing of muscles, increased breathing, panting, “butterflies” in tummy, raised blood pressure, sweating, digestive changes; psychological responses may include altered moods and thinking; and behavioural responses are usually formed as fight, flight, and/or fright. Although all of these responses prime us for action and a burst of energy and in some cases can be helpful, they can work against us when they are exaggerated or used when not needed. Then, we can overestimate danger (constantly scan for it) and underestimate our abilities to manage it (overlook non-threats). Long-term and excessive anxiety can be detrimental to our ability to cope and lead to various negative outcomes (such as headaches, nausea, muscular discomfort, blurred vision, diarrhoea, low mood, memory problems, irritability, insomnia, fidgeting, avoidance, procrastination); but by breaking “anxiety cycles” we can break anxiety and its negative effects.



Consider trigger>behaviour>consequence>fear: Muscle tension>Chest pain>“I’ll have a heart attack!”>fear; time for work>can’t find keys>“I’ll lose my job”>fear. And consider the many types of **biased thinking** that can be used: Extreme thinking (Catastrophising, All-or-nothing, Unrealistic Standards), Selective attention (Exaggerating, overgeneralising, ignoring the positive, scanning for negative), Relying on intuition (jumping to conclusions, emotional reasoning), Self-reproach (self-blame and criticism, name calling, taking things personally), and worrying (what if...). Such maintains anxiety. Moreover, we maintain anxiety (1) behaviourally by avoiding and escaping from the challenge and instead seeking comfort (drinking, taking drugs, seeking reassurance regularly), and (2) socially by experiencing stressful situations (relationships, work, etc.). It’s important to understand what causes and maintains anxiety so that we can break it.

Although we are all vulnerable in different ways, the main causing factors of anxiety are genes, circumstances, environment, and experiences. To manage anxiety, we need to rely more on **copng skills** (effective long-term skills to build confidence in managing challenges) than **safety behaviour** (short-term behaviours to get through challenges and do not build confidence) to overcome anxiety in the long-term. Some common coping skills include:



- ❖ Manage anxieties: keep detailed diaries, recording physical feelings, emotions, thoughts, responses
 - What triggers my distress?
 - What situations are easy or hard?
 - What are my feelings (body and emotion) and thoughts?
 - What are my actions? What helps to cope and what makes it worse?
 - What maintains anxiety and what helps overcome it?

- ❖ Manage body: dizziness, tiredness, tingling, chest/stomach pains, nausea, difficulty in breathing, tremors, cramps, stiff neck/shoulders, tight chest, digestive problems can all occur with anxiety
 - Controlled breathing can help: use lungs fully (not top of lungs only); breathe smoothly (not gulping/gasping), gently, slowly, and evenly; breathe through nose, allowing belly to swell; practice (sitting down or lying down) regularly; aim for 12 breathes a minute (in and out=1).
 - Relaxation: Practice regularly and consistently; choose venue, environment, times, clothing, position wisely; adopt a “passive-attitude” (let go, have a go, don’t judge); breathe; record.
 - Types of relaxation: Lengthy (to build up skill and endurance), shortened, simple, cued (set time), applied (when needed)
 - Exercise can help manage stress and alleviate physical symptoms.

- ❖ Manage psychology: thoughts>feelings happen in/outside of awareness, for positive or negative reasons but breaking the cycle of harmful thoughts can help how we are feeling.
 - Distraction: as we are serial-taskers not multi-taskers we can only do one thing at a time, physical activity (jog, run, minor social chore, cleaning), refocusing (put attention elsewhere), and mental exercises (mantra, imagining, recalling) can all help. Key is to pick one that suits you and the situation (e.g., reading a book works great in dentist waiting room, not when driving) and to build a repertoire to cover various scenarios.
 - Testing and recording: identify anxious image or thought (where/when it occurred, the feeling, the thought), stop and review—is it realistic/understandable?, are there reasons not to worry?, what is worst that can happen?, what would I do if the worst happened?, what biased thinking is occurring?, what’s a more balanced alternative way of thinking?, test new ways of thinking (e.g., compare, test, and survey theories).

- ❖ Facing Fears: avoiding and procrastinating enhances or maintains the fear. Important to face fears at own pace if possible
 - Graded practice: understanding your fear (what triggers it? What can I already achieve? what makes it easier for me?) will give a guide to tackle it gradually, effectively, and fairly to build confidence through small steps success. 1. Set targets, 2. Grade tasks, 3. Practice.
 - Problem solving: gives a framework to overcome a problem. 1. Define the problem (where, what, when, whom, etc.), 2. Brainstorm solutions (be broad and creative as well as specific), 3. Look at your resources (friends, environment, time, skills, etc.), 4. Pros and cons (evaluate possible solutions in line with resources, keep a back up plan), 5. Choose, plan, and enact a solution (what, how, and when will I do it, who is involved? where will it occur? what is my back up plan?), and 6. Review it (what went well? what can I improve?).

- ❖ Be assertive: instead of passive or aggressive/manipulative, be able to say “No”, know own boundaries, respect levels, rights, needs, and responsibilities, and those of others, know which “battles” to choose. Decide and state what you want and be prepared for refusal, aggression, manipulation, and negotiation.