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ANXIETY

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal response to situations that we see as threatening to us and that we all experience from time to time. For example, taking an exam, going to the dentist, giving a performance, triggers anxiety symptoms in most people. 'Healthy' levels of anxiety can even be helpful in some situations such as when we need to perform well, or cope with an emergency as it helps us focus on our task.

Unfortunately, anxiety, whilst not dangerous, can be uncomfortable or even frightening in many situations. It makes people worry that there is something is seriously wrong with them, and can even convince people to stop leading their normal day to day life. More so, if it goes on for a long time, it can sometimes cause a variety of physical symptoms like dizziness, high blood pressure, lack of appetite, stomach problems etc.

The good news is, that almost any anxiety can be cured. This leaflet aims to help you develop strategies, necessary to do so.

Anxiety Symptoms

People who suffer from anxiety may have thoughts similar to the statements below. Sometimes it is possible to be suffering from anxiety and not even know it, particularly if you don't view yourself as an anxious person. Instead, you tend to mistake symptoms of anxiety for a physical illness. Therefore, the first step in learning to deal with anxiety is recognising how anxiety is affecting you

- ❖ "I worry about everything, I get tense and nervous and lose my mind'

- ❖ "When I go out, I always tend to worry about all the things that might go wrong. My heart starts to pound, I start to sweat and I feel like I am losing control of myself. I have to get out".
- ❖ "I often wake up in the night with my heart pounding and my mind racing, and then can't get back to sleep"

Anxiety can affect us in at least four different ways. It affects:

- How we feel → emotions
- How we think → thoughts
- The way we behave → behaviour
- The way our body works → body

In order to check out whether you may be experiencing anxiety, there is a checklist below to check symptoms you have experienced in the last two weeks. If you are regularly experiencing some or all of these symptoms, then you may be suffering from anxiety.

How you feel

- Anxious, nervous, frightened yes/no
- Feeling something bad is going to happen yes/no
- Tense, stressed, on edge, unsettled yes/no
- Unreal, strange, woozy, detached, panicky yes/no

How you think

- Constant worrying , ruminating yes/no
- Unable to concentrate yes/no
- Racing Thoughts yes/no
- Mind jumping from one thing to another yes/no
- Thinking the worst is about to happen and dwelling on it yes/no

How you behave

- Pace up and down yes/no
- Easily distracted yes/no
- Unable to sit and relax yes/no
- Talking more than usual yes/no
- Irritable behaviour yes/no
- Drink more alcohol yes/no
- Increased/decreased appetite yes/no
- Avoid feared situations yes/no

Physical symptoms

- Heart pounding, palpitations yes/no
- Chest feels tight/painful yes/no
- Tingling/ numbness in toes or fingers yes/no
- Stomach pains yes/no
- Abdominal cramping yes/no
- Feeling restless yes/no
- Tense muscles yes/no
- Body aching yes/no
- Sweating yes/no
- Breathing changes yes/no
- Dizzy, light headed yes/no

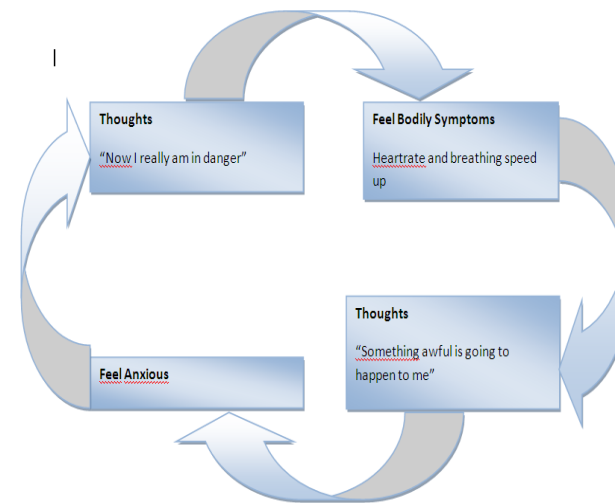
What causes anxiety symptoms

Anxiety is the feeling we get when our body responds to a frightening or threatening experience. It has been called the 'fight or flight' response, an evolutionary important bodily response dating back to the time of the cave men. It allows us humans to keep ourselves safe. It is simply our body preparing for action, either to fight danger or run away from it as fast as possible. The purpose of the physical symptoms of anxiety therefore is to prepare your body to deal with the threat. For example, imagine that in the cave men days, you were faced with a predator about to attack you. In order to run or fight, your muscles would be tense, ready for action. Your heart would beat faster to carry blood to your muscles, your lungs needed more oxygen, and you would sweat

to stop your body overheating. Your mouth would feel dry. If you would realise that what you thought wasn't a deadly predator but a harmless animal, you would feel relieved but may also have felt shaky and weak afterwards.

Fortunately, nowadays we are not often in such life or death situations, but our bodily responses are exactly the same. In fact, experiencing these symptoms can make us feel worse, especially if we don't understand them.

There may be several reasons why people are affected by anxiety, more than others. For example personality, having learned to worry, stressful life events, or daily hassles.



Maintenance cycle of anxiety

Some people are affected by anxiety for a relatively short period of time, in others being anxious becomes a habit developing into a problem for life. Sometimes, a vicious circle develops whereby

anxiety keeps itself going, like in the figure below. Moreover, in certain cases, a 'fear of the fear' develops, whereby the anticipation of anxiety symptoms is enough to trigger them.

Avoidance

When the anxiety maintenance cycle has established, avoidance is often used as a way to cope. Naturally, people tend to avoid danger. In the case of anxiety, the avoided triggers are generally not *real* dangers, but ordinary things like crowded places, public transport, talking to people, going out for dinner etc. When avoidance of these activities and places happens, life can become very difficult and inconvenient. People can become isolated, lack confidence and become even more anxious than before.

Can you check your own anxiety for a vicious circle that keeps your anxiety going, for example your bodily symptoms, your thoughts and feelings about these symptoms, the places/activities you are avoiding or have stopped doing?

Managing Anxiety

The good news is, that almost any anxiety can be cured by breaking the vicious circle. To do this, you have to focus on the following areas:

- Understanding your anxiety better: knowing the triggers, frequency and intensity
- Reducing physical symptoms
- Knowing and altering how you think
- Change what you do

Step 1: Understanding your anxiety

By keeping an anxiety diary: for at least two weeks, keep an hourly rating of your anxiety on a scale of 0-10. Note down where you were, what you did, who were with you, what you were thinking about. This may make you more aware of the triggers, your general level of stress and also what makes the anxiety better.

Problem solving approach: if there is a realistic worry or problem, write it down, and brainstorm about as many solutions as you can think, even the ones that seem silly or unrealistic. Think about similar problems in the past; how have you dealt with those? What would you tell someone else in the same situation?

Then, think of a stepped plan, keeping the worst case scenario in mind. If you can think of a plan to cope with this, your anxiety may even reduce.

General stress busters:

- Having a relaxing hobby
- Time to do enjoyable things
- Enough sleep
- Eating well and balanced
- Exercise regularly
- Learn to relax

Step 2: Reducing physical symptoms

Relaxation: recognise signs of tension, then prevent further anxiety from developing by relaxation techniques. Some people find reading a book or doing some exercise helpful, others prefer a more structured relaxation exercise.

Important to know that relaxation is nothing 'soft'. It is a *skill* that can be learned, and needs practice to become good at it. There are several relaxation

exercises, for example deep muscle relaxation, controlled breathing and distraction.

Step 3: Knowing and altering how you think

Looking at the figure on page 3, thoughts take an important role in maintaining the vicious cycle of anxiety.

Can you check your own thoughts, for example what goes often through your mind when you feel anxious? Do you have any pictures in your mind about what might happen? And are there any thoughts that make you feel worse?

It is often not easy to spot your thoughts and specifically the thoughts that make your anxiety worse. Sometimes, these thoughts pop up in your mind quickly, almost as if they are automatic. We call them 'hot' thoughts. You may have had them for such a long time that they feel completely normal, yet they still can be crucial in the onset and maintenance of anxiety. Remember that every thought, even if you think it is too silly to write down, is important. Earlier on in this leaflet we discussed the importance of keeping a journal. This way you can easily spot the hot thoughts that were associated with feeling anxious. The goal is to spot the thoughts, and replacing them with a more balanced, healthier way of thinking. This takes practice, but like stopping any habit, you will get better at it if you practice frequently.

- ❖ *What are your 'hot' thoughts? (for example, 'everything always goes wrong for me')*
- ❖ *If you have identified them, ask yourself the following questions: am I exaggerating? Jumping to conclusions? Or focusing on the negative and dismissing anything positive?*
- ❖ *Then, try for every hot thought to generate a more balanced thought (for example, 'today is a bad day, but yesterday wasn't too bad and last week I managed to do xyz')*
- ❖ *What would you tell your friend if he/she was having these thoughts?*

Step 4: Change what you do

Changing your behaviour is very important to break the habit of avoiding the fear. By taking small steps, starting with the behaviours/activities that evoke the least anxiety, you train yourself to tolerate anxiety whilst at the same time building confidence.

- ❖ Set small, realistic goals. Write these down.
- ❖ Gradually build up the time you spend in situations that you previously would have avoided. You will notice that initially there will be an increase in anxiety, but that it will fade eventually and that next time it will be easier to tolerate the same situation.
- ❖ Avoid 'safety behaviours' as they can keep the anxiety going. By letting these habits go, you will learn that nothing bad will happen.
- ❖ Ask yourself challenging questions like 'would I really get unwell if I went out?'

Treatment available

- ❖ Self help, such as this leaflet
- ❖ Going to your 'huisarts', or POH GGZ in your doctor's practice if they have one
- ❖ Occasionally, doctors prescribe pharmacological treatment, usually for short term use
- ❖ People find mindfulness or other relaxation exercises help them cope with and overcome anxiety. Please see the Counseling Service Amsterdam website for examples.
www.counselingserviceamsterdam.nl
- ❖ Your doctor may refer you for psychological treatment if your anxiety does not respond to self help alone.

Counseling Service Amsterdam can help

At Counseling Service Amsterdam, our experienced and fully registered psychologists can help you taking steps towards diminishing the influence of anxiety on your life.

You can refer yourself by calling our service on 020-6184243.

We will be able to answer your call between 9.00am and 3.00pm, Monday to Friday. If you are being referred to our answer phone, please leave us a message and we will return your call as soon as possible.

Alternatively, your GP can refer you to us by sending us your details and you can ask your GP to notify us of any special requirements in accessing our service, for example if English is not your first language and you require an interpreter.