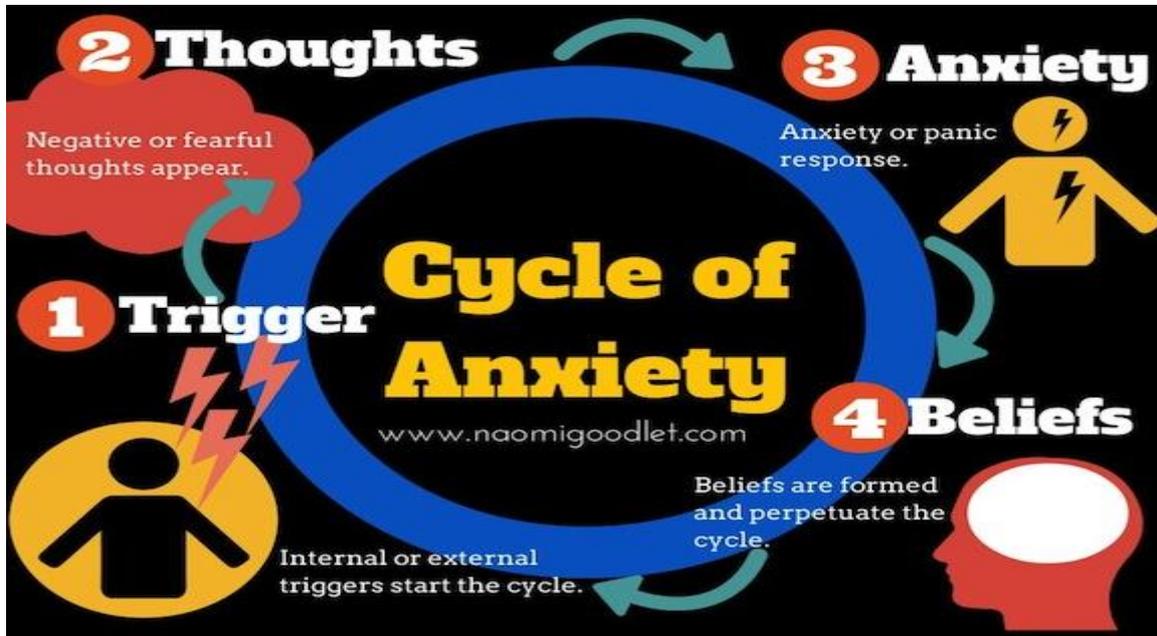


How Anxiety Works

While anxiety can be unpleasant, it is a normal human experience designed to keep us safe. It often activates when something we care about seems threatened, and will usually pass once the perceived threat has passed.



Graphic used with kind permission of Naomi Goodlet

www.naomigoodlet.com

Sometimes anxiety symptoms don't have an obvious cause (especially if we have been stressed for some time), but the good news is that the symptoms will come and go (they won't stay at 100% for long).

A counsellor can assist you to process the thoughts and feelings for each of the four stages.

What are the Symptoms most commonly experienced?

- a feeling of being on edge and nervous, or having high levels of anxiety
- persistent and irrational fears or excessive worry
- difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- irritability
- trouble sleeping
- **avoidance** of situations, places, people, **activities (including study)**, thoughts or feelings that trigger anxiety.

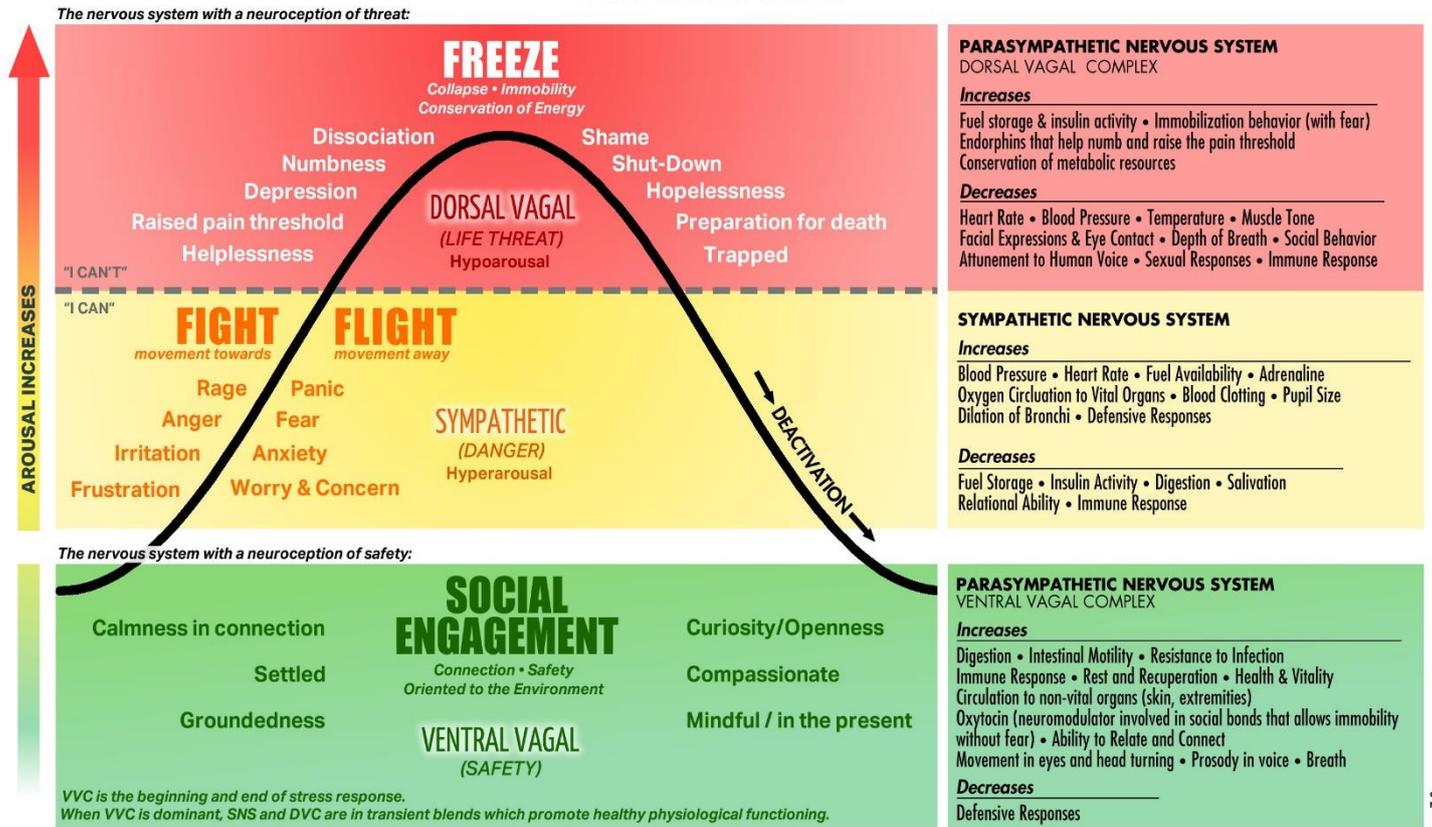
The physical symptoms of anxiety may include:

- a pounding heart
- shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or a dry mouth
- tightness in chest
- sweating, trembling, tingling or numbness

People who experience anxiety over long periods of time can also develop muscle tension and headaches.

How Anxiety is experienced in the Body:

POLYVAGAL CHART



Graphic used with kind permission of Ruby Jo Walker

www.rubyjowalker.com

What do I do if I am experiencing anxiety?

Step 1 - Do something.

- If you don't do anything recognise you are in 'freeze' mode above.
- **Keep in mind the old saying: 'If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten'.**

Step 2 - Do something different.

- Try some or all of the techniques on the ANU Counselling 'Anxiety Management Strategies' section below.
- Sometimes good strategies become more effective with practice. Give the breathing and moving techniques a few tries before dismissing them.
- Consider doing some activities that reduce anxiety for you on a regular basis. Anxiety is often a patterned response to situations or an underlying trait and may come back.

Step 3 - Speak to another human about what you are experiencing.

- Any non-judgemental human that you are comfortable with would be a good start.
- Then aim for someone with some functional and preferably professional skills. They may assist even more.
- Someone in your hall of residence, someone in student counselling or someone on the phone at the ANU Wellbeing and Support Line. You may be comfortable speaking to your doctor and then getting a referral if necessary. Depending on the relationship dynamics and their communication skills, speaking to a family member can assist some people greatly.

Anxiety Management Strategies

This section aims to provide concrete, practical strategies you can use to cope with a wave of anxiety, as well as ongoing habits that will help with long term symptom reduction.

1. Breathing

Anxiety can cause us to breathe rapidly. This is not dangerous (it oxygenates our muscles in case we need to run away), but too much oxygen can make us dizzy and light headed.

Slowing and deepening your breath for 3-5 mins is a good antidote. Try the following:

- Sigh out fully, then breathe in, right down towards your abdomen.
- Focus on making your breathing pattern more even, and lengthening the outbreath.
- Count in for 4, hold for 2, out for 6 –or try a breathing app to help slow you down.

Ongoing: Practise breathing at 5-6 breaths per minute a few times each day (especially when you are not anxious) to make slow breathing easy and automatic, and reduce overall stress.

2. Moving and relaxing your body

- Try moving location or posture (eg straighten up, engage your core muscles, or walk to the kitchen and drink some cold water)
- Do something active that burns off the adrenalin (eg walk briskly upstairs, do some star jumps, or go for a run)
- Do something that relaxes tension (eg tighten and release your muscles, consciously soften and relax, try some gentle stretches, or take a warm shower).

Ongoing: 30 mins of cardio exercise 3-5 days of the week can significantly reduce anxiety. Regular engagement in relaxing activities such as yoga or tai chi can also be very beneficial.

3. Looking after your physiological needs

Spend some time thinking about what your body needs. Something to eat or drink? Some quiet time? Warmth? Fresh air?

Ongoing: Good self-care routines will increase your resilience. Think about your sleep and eating routines, how busy you are, intake of caffeine/ alcohol/ drugs/ sugar, as well as exercise.

4. Grounding in the present moment

- Notice what you can see, hear, feel, smell and taste right now.
- Notice where you are and what day it is, bring to mind the date and your current age.
- Focus on a sensation such as feeling your feet firmly on the ground, holding a cool drink, squeezing a ball, saying Ommm, or putting your hand on your heart.

Ongoing: Learn and practice mindfulness techniques that help you stay connected to the here and now as anxiety is often about future possibilities that don't eventuate.

5. Acceptance

Telling yourself you *shouldn't* be anxious or it's *terrible* to be anxious can exacerbate symptoms, so instead, experiment with an attitude of *gentle curiosity*.

- Observe sensations and thoughts like a neutral scientist eg “that’s interesting, my heart is beating fast, and my mind is playing out worst case scenarios”.
- Imagine breathing into any discomfort, sitting with it rather than battling against it.

6. Reassuring Thoughts

It may help to experiment with thoughts like:

- “This will pass”
- “I can tolerate this”
- “My fight/flight alarm system has been activated, but I am safe right now”
- “This is just anxiety, anxiety is treatable and I can get help with this”

Ongoing: Many people find it useful to dispute irrational fears and seek evidence for more helpful, balanced thoughts. Others find it works better to just allow the negative thoughts to be there, while re-orienting towards preferred action.

7. Reach out for support

It is not weak to need other people. Humans survive better in groups, so we are built to feel safer when we are with trusted others.

- Turning to a friend or family member for reassurance, company or advice can make a positive difference. Even just picturing a loved one and what they might say can help
- Crisis counsellors are available for you to talk to if you call or text a helpline
- If you have a pet, giving them a pat can make a difference.

Ongoing: Joining groups (eg a sports team, choir, craft group, or dungeons and dragons group) increases our social connections and reduces our vulnerability to anxiety.

8. Avoid avoidance

Our survival instinct is to avoid threatening situations, but if the challenge is something that we need or want to do (eg an exam, or party), avoidance increases anxiety long term.

- Coach yourself where possible to stay with anxiety provoking situations.
- Do this in small doses and practice tolerating the feelings that come up.
- Positive mental rehearsal can help counter anxious fears about what might happen.

9. Take some positive action

Doing something practical often helps people feel better when anxious. Try the following:

- Practical actions targeting the trigger worry eg saying no to an unreasonable request.
- Self-care actions to reduce anxiety so you can think more clearly eg 3 deep breaths

- Positive actions that are in line with who you want to be eg volunteer work, which can feel satisfying and take your focus away from anxious thinking.

*Ongoing: Aim for a healthy balance of activities in your day, including work, rest and fun time.
Experiment with slowing down and doing one thing at a time rather than being too busy.*

10. Problem solving

Anxiety will often reduce when we can get clearer about what to do next.

- Spend some time clarifying problems, writing down potential options, evaluating pros and cons, and seeking additional information and advice.
- Scheduling a worry time can help you to free yourself up from unproductive and stressful ongoing worry, by postponing it to the next allotted time.

Recommended additional resources

- Crisis telephone counselling for immediate support:
 - ANU Wellbeing and Support Line 24/7 Voice Call: 1300 050 327, Text: 0488 884 170
 - Lifeline. Voice call: 13 11 14 (24 hrs), Text 0477 13 11 14 (6pm-12am)
- ANU Counselling offer free one-on-one counselling and group programs to assist students with anxiety. Relevant handouts available on our website include: Relaxation, Exam Anxiety, and Mental Health Resources (which lists informative websites where you can learn more).
- You may like to download apps on your phone to assist with breathing and mindfulness. See our free apps postcard available at ANU Counselling reception.