

Understanding Anxiety

How the threat system, thoughts, body sensations, and avoidance can reinforce one another.

What anxiety is

Anxiety is a normal protective response that becomes a problem when the alarm system activates too often, too strongly, or in situations that are not actually dangerous. It can show up as worry, tension, racing thoughts, irritability, difficulty concentrating, stomach upset, rapid heartbeat, or an urge to avoid.

The anxiety cycle

- A trigger appears.
- The mind predicts danger or loss of control.
- The body activates the fight-flight-freeze system.
- Avoidance, reassurance-seeking, checking, or escape brings short-term relief.
- The brain learns that the situation must have been dangerous, which can strengthen future anxiety.

Skills that can help

- Slow the body first: lengthen the exhale, unclench the jaw, drop the shoulders, and orient to the room.
- Name the prediction rather than treating it as a fact: “My mind is telling me that...”
- Reduce avoidance gradually when it is safe to do so. Small, repeated approach steps teach the nervous system that discomfort can be tolerated.
- Set a brief “worry period” rather than allowing worry to take over the entire day.
- Support basics that affect arousal: sleep routine, regular meals, hydration, movement, and reasonable caffeine use.

When therapy can help

Therapy can help identify the specific anxiety pattern, separate realistic problem-solving from repetitive worry, build coping skills, and develop individualized exposure or behavioral strategies when appropriate.

Try this reflection

What do you tend to do immediately after anxiety rises? Which response gives short-term relief but may keep the cycle going?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.