

# Anxiety, Distress, Restlessness

Everyone experiences fear and anxiety now and then, and these days there are a lot of reasons to **worry** more, to feel **insecure** or even **afraid**. Anxiety and fear can manifest themselves in many, and sometimes surprising, ways.

## Possible Signs

- Worries, rumination
- Mental and physical **tension**, restlessness and inability to relax
- Increased frightfulness
- **Difficulty concentrating** or feeling of “mind going blank”
- **Irritability**
- **Fear of “going crazy”** or losing control
- Feeling that objects are somehow **unreal** or that oneself is “not really here”
- Feeling **dizzy**, unsteady. Fear of fainting or dying
- Headache, difficulties falling and staying asleep
- Palpitations, **pounding heart**, accelerated heart rate
- Trembling or shaking
- Dry mouth, hot flushes or cold chills
- Difficulty **breathing**, feeling of choking, chest pain, throat **tightness**
- **Nausea**, vomiting or diarrhea
- Numbness or tingling sensations

## Fight or Flight

*Why is fear helpful and important?*

The fight or flight response has been described a hundred years ago by Walter Cannon.

Let's imagine a hungry lion appears in front of you. Fear would be quite a normal and helpful response in this scenario, since it would warn you about the danger and you would immediately feel the need to protect yourself. What ensues is a strong activation of the **sympathetic nervous system** (part of the autonomic nervous system), which leads us to fight, flee, or freeze (play dead), in an attempt to avoid being the lion's next meal. To flee, you would need to supply your muscles with more oxygen. This can be achieved by increasing your respiratory rate, your heart rate and your blood

pressure. To flee, you would also need to strongly focus on an escape route (tunnel vision, feeling dizzy). To fight, you would once again need well-supplied muscles and the ability to fully concentrate, in order to avoid dangerous attacks. Finally, to freeze, or play dead, physical tension and superficial breathing are needed. All of the above-mentioned symptoms are actually **harmless and suitable temporary physical changes**. Once the lion has retreated and you are no longer in danger, a process of **restoration** is initiated by the activation of the “relaxing part” of the autonomic nervous system (the **parasympathetic** branch).

## Vicious Circle Anxiety Disorder

For some people, the fight or flight response becomes activated in situations where no real danger is present.

These symptoms can be very difficult to endure and some may even fear their occurrence. In addition, the symptoms can be mistaken for physical disorders (e.g. heart attack), and this can itself induce further fear. This way, fear and **anxiety can get out of control** and a vicious circle begins to form.

This is the reason why it is important to recognize and understand the spectrum of symptoms of anxiety, so that they appear less threatening.

If these symptoms are left unchecked, one may develop a so-called anxiety disorder. Examples of anxiety disorders include: **panic disorders, phobias or generalised anxiety disorders, which manifest as a chronic, exaggerated worrying about different topics**. Subsequently, other problems such as **sleep disorders, depression, obsessive compulsive disorders or augmented intake of addictive substances** can occur. Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental illnesses and are highly treatable.

## Accept Emotions and relax!

In order to break the vicious circle, the physical or mental phenomena that seem threatening should be admitted and **unmasked** as explicable and, in dangerous situations, even as helpful reactions.

Various relaxing exercises can have an impact on the autonomic nervous system. They can be applied during stress- and anxiety-triggering situations as well as on a day-to-day basis, as preventive measures. Some exercises include:

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**
- **Breathing exercises**
- **Imagination exercises** such as the **safe place exercise**
- **Mindfulness**
- **Meditation**
- Gratitude journal
- **Sports** to reduce physical tension

You will find instructions for some of these in separate information sheets on our homepage.

Be careful with substances such as alcohol, cannabis or sleeping pills. In anxious persons in particular, they can quickly induce addiction. In addition, activating substances such as caffeine should be avoided, due to the possible increase in anxiety and restlessness.

Talking about feelings and thoughts can have a calming effect.

## Professional Help?

Professional help should be sought, if you:

- find it hard to control your anxiety,
- are not sure about physical symptoms,
- feel sad or depressed,
- feel like you want to hurt yourself or experience suicidal thoughts.

Anxiety disorders are highly treatable with psychotherapy and, if necessary, with medication. We have put together an [information leaflet](#) on how to seek help and find a therapist on our homepage.

## Information & Resources

More information and advice:

- Information about anxiety provided by [Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Angst & Depression](#) (German) and by the [organisation pro mente sana](#) (German)
- [Relaxation exercises](#) by the Institute for Complementary and Integrative Medicine, Universitäts-spital Zürich (Mind Body Medicine, German)
- [Guideline for patients \*Behandlung von Angststörungen\*](#) (German) and the [S3-Leitlinie \*Behandlung von Angststörungen\*](#) (German) published by the Association of the Scientific Medical Societies in Germany e.V.
- [Guideline for the management of anxiety disorders](#) by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, England & Wales)
- [Advice on how to overcome fear and anxiety](#) by the Mental Health Foundation (UK)

Further references:

- Cannon, W. B. (1929). *Bodily changes in pain, hunger, fear, and rage: An account of recent researches into the function of emotional excitement*. New York: D. Appleton
- Jerath, R., Crawford, M.W., Barnes, V.A. et al. [Self-Regulation of Breathing as a Primary Treatment for Anxiety](#). *Appl Psychophysiol Biofeedback* 40, 107–115 (2015).

## Any Questions?

If you have further questions, please see the contact details for mental health support that are listed in our leaflet „[Mental Health Support](#)“, as well as the references and links in this document. Please note that while we select links to external websites carefully, we cannot guarantee for the accuracy or quality of these websites.