

## Anxiety Resource

### What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is one of the most common kinds of distress in North America. It can come from stressful situations (either current, past, or future) or not be specific to any one thing (“generalized anxiety”). Sometimes people experience an increase in heart rate, jitters, inability to relax, feeling frantic, stomach pains, difficulty concentrating, feelings of fear, and other symptoms. Anxiety can range from very mild to debilitating.

But where does it come from? Anxiety is rooted in the evolution of our species.

Consider a time past when a human might encounter a hippo (they’re incredibly dangerous!) on the way to fetch water. To help them survive, their brain might automatically engage the *limbic system*, resulting in one of three responses based on the threat assessment: fight, flight, or freeze.

At this point, the limbic system effectively takes over control of the body, dumping adrenaline, cortisol, and other hormones into the blood. Digestion and other systems not immediately vital to life shut down, favouring those that help flee, fight back, or reduce the damage from an attack. During that period, the *executive functioning* area of the brain (responsible for decision-making and evaluation skills) is overcome. It’s an intense response!

Though hippo attacks are *less* likely at the pool than they used to be, our bodies still have this survival mechanism. And it needs to stay around! Violence and other threats are still a part of our society, but for the lucky, that’s not an everyday reality.

Our threat response system (the fight/flight/freeze) still sees threat *relative* to our experience. We see “bully,” or “airplane,” or “400 IM,” and our brains say, “LOOK OUT IT’S A HIPPO.” And we find ourselves in the same automatic response! For some people, that response can last for a minute, and for others, it’s what they feel most of the time. That’s anxiety.

### Kinds of Anxiety

#### “Helpful” Anxiety

As described, anxiety tells you when there’s a threat. “Helpful” anxiety may be your brain telling you that there is a legitimate problem to pay attention to. There’s usually a specific trigger. It makes sense to feel anxious before a big test. The intensity of the feeling may not be helping, but it’s clear what is contributing to the feeling.

#### “Unhelpful” Anxiety

Sometimes your body tells you there's a threat without a specific trigger. You're just anxious and you don't know why. You may want reassurance. You may feel like you want more attention. You may want to be alone. It's mostly just not feeling great.

## Avoidance

Sometimes anxiety is the result of avoiding a task or feeling. You may have experienced the loss of a pet, loved one, or friend, but don't want to feel the pain of grief. You may be afraid of a race or losing one, and not pay attention to what that fear means.

Anxiety may also encourage avoidance. If you know a task, feeling, or environment usually results in anxiety, you may choose to avoid those situations.

Anxiety comes in and replaces the feelings of grief and fear with what-ifs (*catastrophizing*), imagining what other people think about you (*mind-reading*), or imagining other scenarios (*magical thinking*). Then you go over these thoughts a thousand times in your head (*ruminating*).

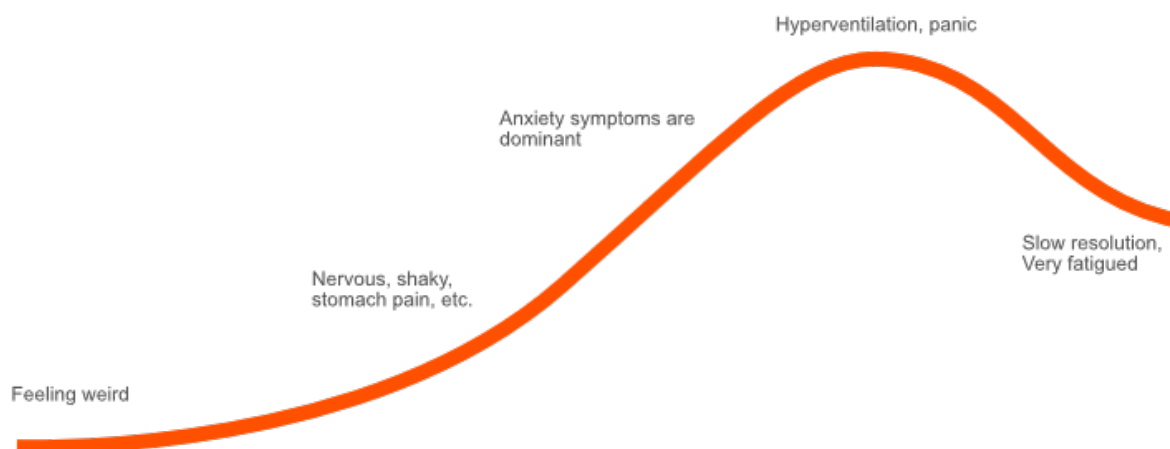
You might have a fight/flight/freeze response, like wanting to leave the pool, arguing with your coach, or feeling sluggish and foggy.

## How can you deal with it?

Anxiety is different for everyone. Sometimes it can help to just identify it, ask for support from someone, and move on. Sometimes it can cause an "attack."

A helpful way to think about anxiety is that it is a *physical* experience that you *did not ask to have*. But you can do something about the symptoms in the meantime.

First, figure out where you are on this anxiety curve.



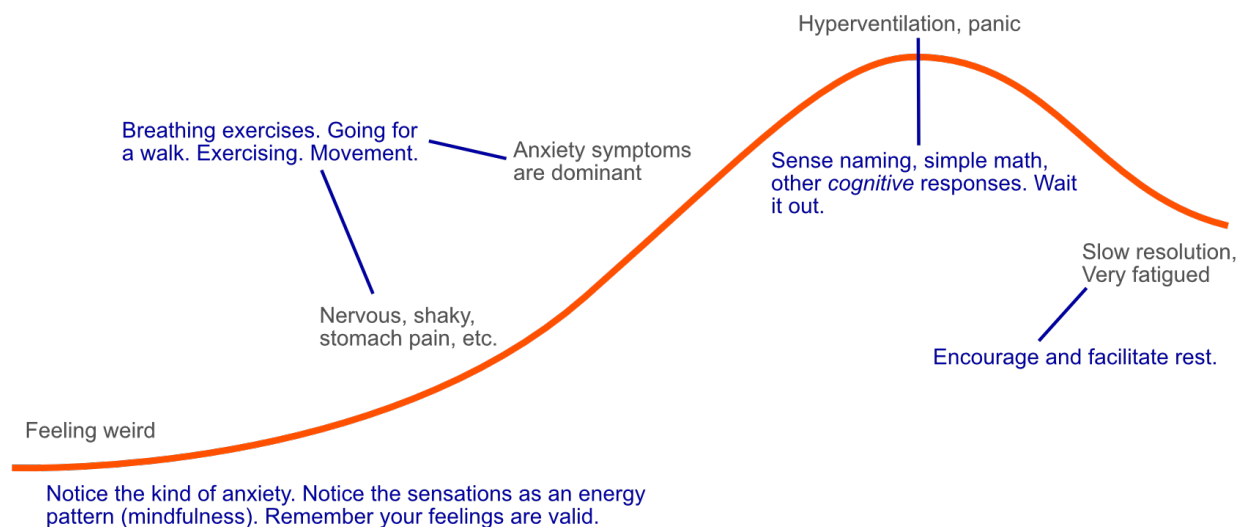
Notice that as the curve goes up, the intensity of the feelings goes up. This is paired with physical sensations. The higher on the curve, the more it is a *felt* experience.

To respond, think about taking care of yourself with the same level of physical response. If the intensity is low, then some deep breaths or talking to yourself or someone else can be effective.

As the intensity rises, these responses probably won't be enough. You may need many more good breaths or to go for a walk. It's maybe even a good time to exercise! Getting in the water for swimming practice may be perfect for channeling your anxiety and working it out. These are *actual chemicals* in your body that you can *metabolize!*

When the anxiety is very, very high and you feel complete panic, you just need to get yourself through the moment. This is when it's time to do something very *cognitive* to encourage your executive functioning areas to come back in control.

Cognitive activities include simple math, reciting the alphabet backwards, or naming everything you notice with each sense (don't start with vision – too many things!). Once you feel grounded and in control, you can try one of the other responses. You may also need a rest – anxiety attacks are exhausting. Remember, you just fought a hypothetical hippo!



NOTE: If you ever feel like your anxiety has reached a point where you're afraid of what is going to happen or it's too intense to bear, try calling the BC Crisis Centre (1-800-784-2433). They are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and services are available in 140 languages. It would probably be a good idea to contact a registered counsellor or psychologist for more help.

Next, you can start to notice "triggers." Try to ask yourself *what* questions, rather than *why*. *What* contributed? *What* did you see or hear? *What* was about to happen? *What* just

happened? The next time these triggers come up, you can be more prepared and have your response planned. Maybe it'll be a little easier the next time.

Lastly, be kind to yourself! This happens to millions of people every day. It's your body's natural response that survived to help you survive!

### **Resource Links**