



Streetsbrook Parents

Anxiety

*What it is, what it is not, how it feels, who suffers from it, how to manage it,
how to improve it – and everything else you need to know about it!*



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Introduction (i)

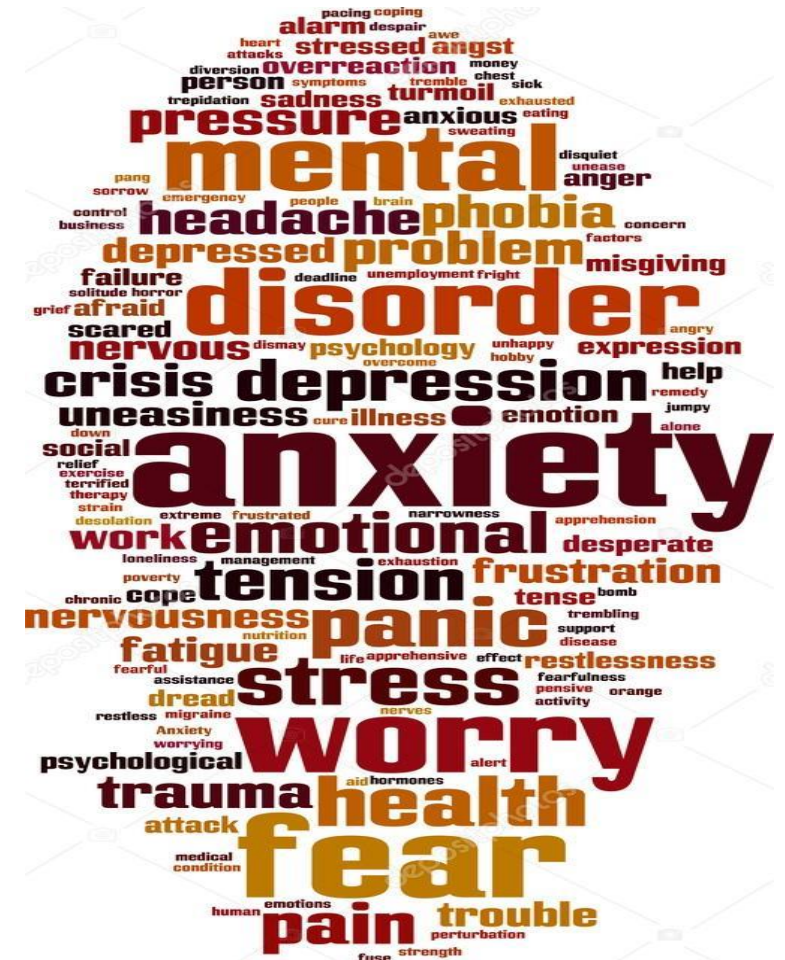


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- I wrote this talk for staff originally, to help **adults** in schools understand anxiety in themselves
- If we as adults understand our own anxiety, we can help our children much better to overcome theirs
- I've put in lots of tips and practical exercises that you can use either for yourself or with your children – so I might get you on your feet in a bit to practise a few!



Do ask questions as we go through if you like

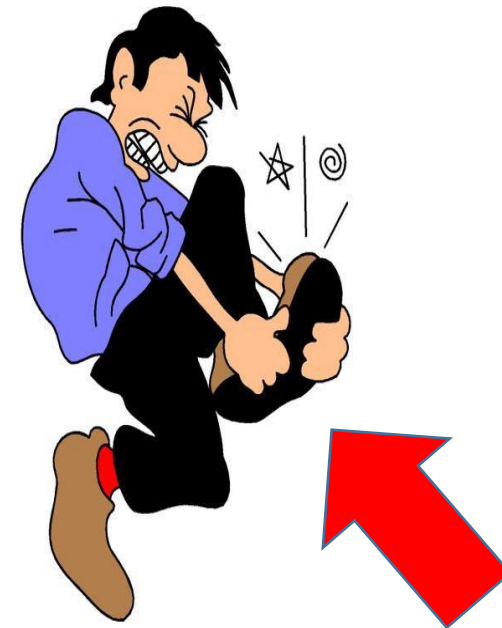




- I'm aware that some of us here might struggle with anxiety, and talking about it can be triggering. So here is tip number one:



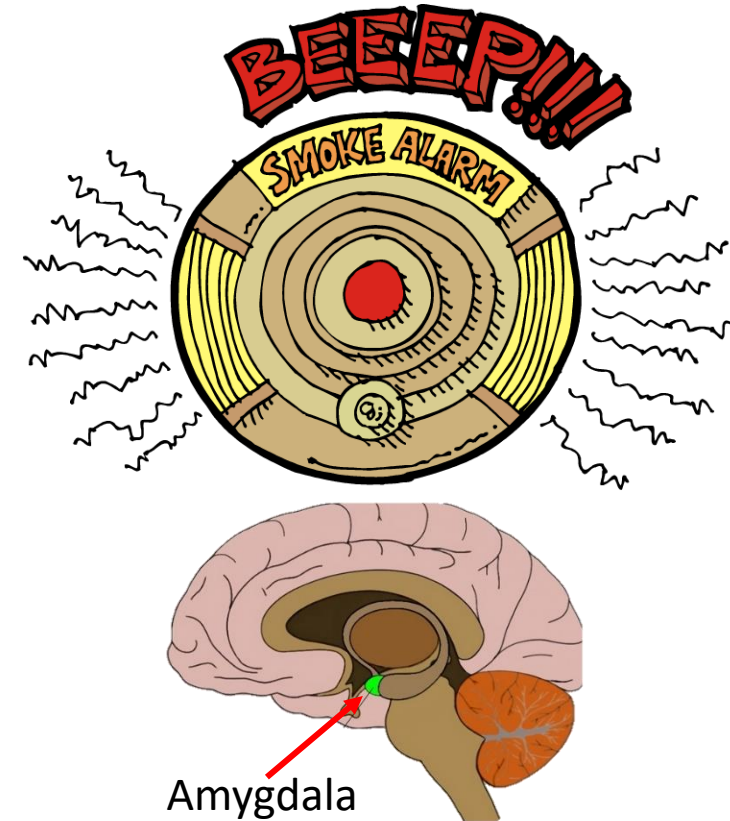
If you are finding something difficult to listen to, spend 10% of your attention on thinking about your left foot! It's a great technique that enables us to hear what someone's saying without being overwhelmed by it



What *is* anxiety?



- We are wired to notice threats in the landscape
- It's our 'tiger spotter' that's primarily responsible for anxiety – a small structure in the brain called the amygdala ('the little house where fear lives')
- It's a very effective smoke alarm – it triggers our fight/flight/freeze response
- Brilliant – but big problem is that it can't tell if the smoke is coming from the toast burning or the house burning down





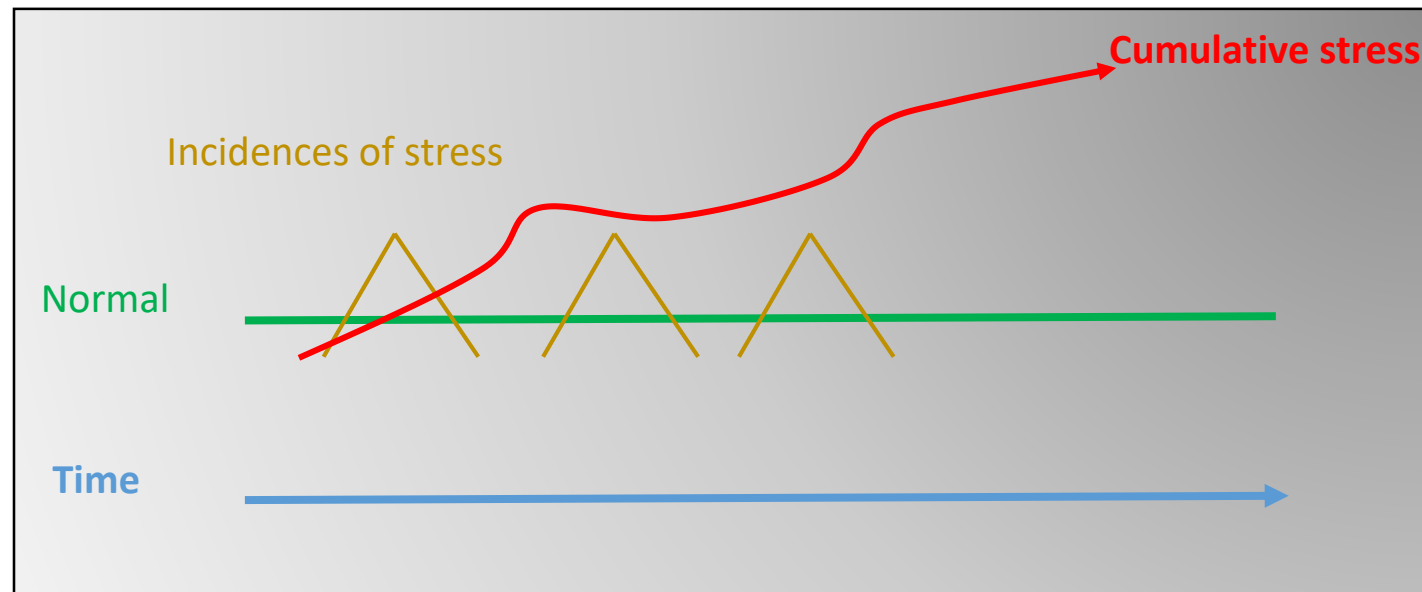
In the normal course of life, we find the source of the smoke, put the fire out and everything calms down again

- However if amygdala keeps being triggered, it gets hyper-sensitive – and also gets bigger
- In situations like we've had over the last few years, where we've been constantly alarmed by one thing after another, it never gets completely switched off or allowed to stay off

The amygdala effect



- We start to normalise at higher and higher levels of agitation – our baseline starts to rise, so more easily triggered by smaller alarms



- Anxiety as a condition is therefore a cumulative effect

What *isn't* anxiety? (i)



- You can see from this that anxiety isn't an illness – it's a **reaction**. The instinctive part of the brain thinks you're in danger and is trying to keep you safe



It only becomes an illness (something treatable by a doctor) if it gets 'stuck' -> the off switch is not working properly and we feel anxious all the time

- Although it comes from the mind, anxiety is **primarily physical** – so it's not just a 'mental health' thing, it's a whole body thing

What *isn't* anxiety? (ii)



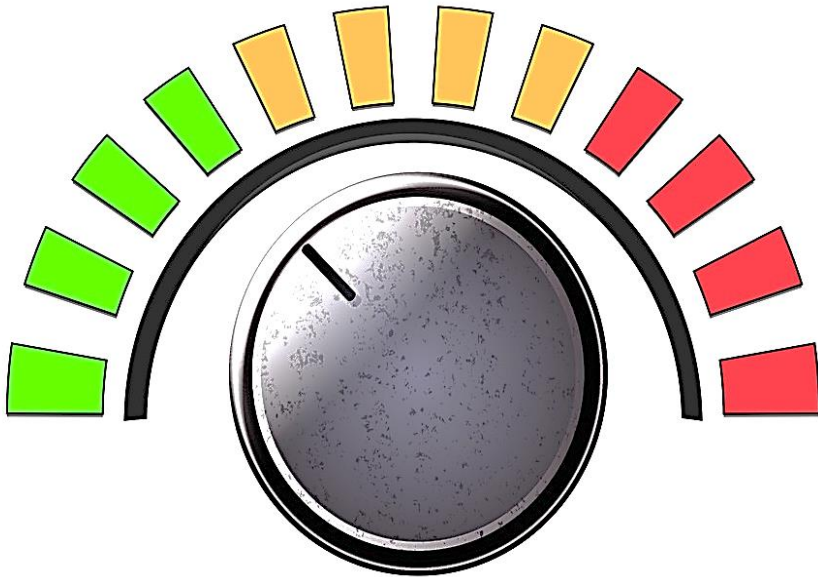
- It isn't voluntary; it can be tempting to be irritable with anxiety in others (probably because it makes us anxious too!), but no-one *chooses* anxiety
- It doesn't mean there is something wrong with us – it is just our brains trying to keep us safe
- But our brains aren't always right... just because we *think* something doesn't mean it's true!



Who gets anxiety?



- Well, it's a reaction. We all have amygdalae. We are all designed to respond to threat. So we all do!
- But *experiencing* anxiety and *suffering* from anxiety are two different things



- Think of it as a volume button: if it's turned right down, you can't hear it – even though it's still on. Turn it all the way up though, and it's utterly deafening and complete torture



A lot of managing anxiety is about learning ways of turning the volume down when it gets too loud – back from suffering to experiencing!



We all have completely individual levels of tolerance – so the 'suffering' mark can come just about anywhere on the scale, depending on the person

e.g. the prime minister compared to our Nannie!

- However we can learn to build up our tolerance to anxiety, and this can have a **massive impact on how happy we are in our lives**

What does it feel like?



We all know what mild anxiety feels like –



- sweaty hands
- butterfly tummy
- dry mouth
- nervous foot jigglings etc

None of this is pleasant, and long-term it is exhausting to live with – and can be a cause of all sorts of other health issues (e.g. eczema, high blood pressure, chronic pain, insomnia etc)



And when it gets really bad?



But I also want to emphasise how TERRIFYING acute anxiety can be, both to experience and to witness in someone else:



One person I spoke to said he was certain he was having a heart attack, and was taken to hospital by ambulance



My sister had a panic attack due to a job interview being cancelled at the last minute – she was grey, sweaty, shaking and couldn't speak



My own experience of it last year led to being unable to breathe or to think straight... I had to go to bed for three days!

Message

Don't under-estimate how grim it can be or how much understanding people need when they're struggling with it – whether adults or children

So what can be done? (i)



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Above anything else, anxiety is caused by a lack of control – so all management needs to be about giving a person (or yourself) back that feeling of control

- Obviously medication is one way – it damps down the reaction in the brain, which reduces the level of activation it triggers, which lessens the horrible feelings
- This is an excellent treatment for severe sufferers/ short-term situations/ acute episodes



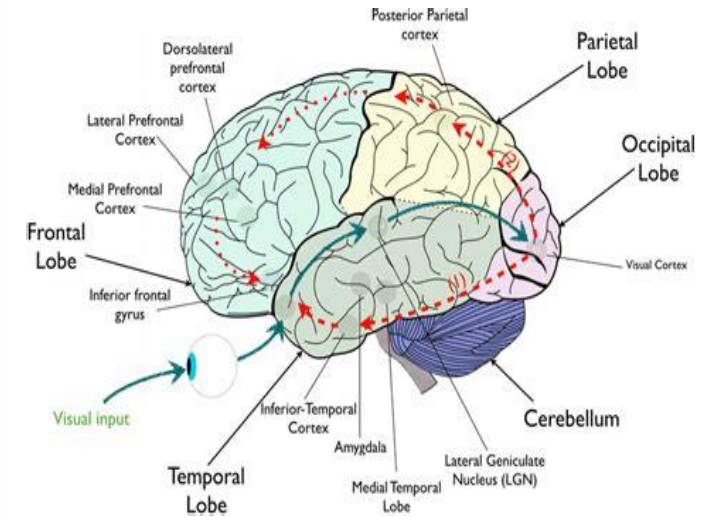
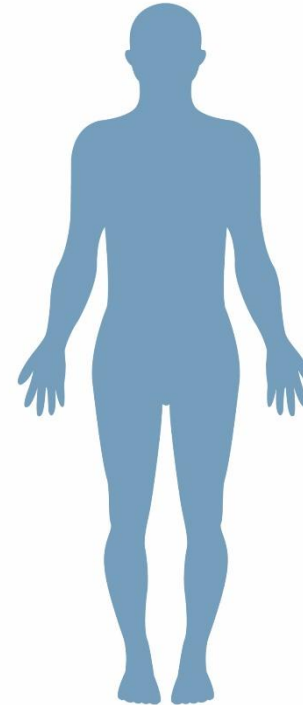
So what can be done? (ii)



➤ But there are also lots of actions we can take to help modify it

➤ These fall into two specific categories:

- ✓ engaging the body
- ✓ engaging other 'thinking' parts of the brain



But there's something else that comes even before these...



- This might sound obvious, but the FIRST thing to do is to see if you can identify what's causing the smoke!
- Sometimes you can put it straight out, and that's the end of the anxiety
 - e.g. my husband's horrible change management jobs... leaving each of those turned off the anxiety instantly, like a tap!
- Very often, dousing the smoke doesn't mean avoiding what's causing the anxiety – it means *tackling* it (e.g. OCD or a phobia)
- It's not always obvious what's causing the problem though, so then we're on to managing it...

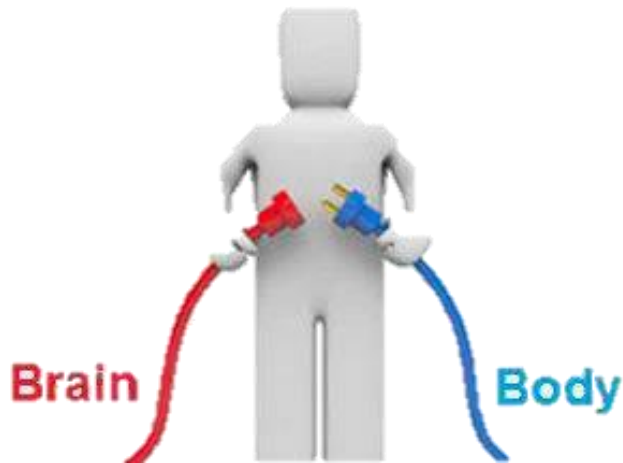
Understanding what happens in the body



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➤ So, the amygdala alarm triggers your fight or flight response

➤ Reaction is *instant*  – signal shoots straight down brain stem into body, without going anywhere near the ‘thinking’ part of the brain



- e.g. whipping hand away from hot oven or slamming on brakes
- if paused to consider whether this was a good idea, you’d be burned/ dead!
- so it’s a brilliant, *essential* factor in our survival

➤ Shows there’s a direct communication link between instinctive part of brain and the body that doesn’t need words or formulated thoughts

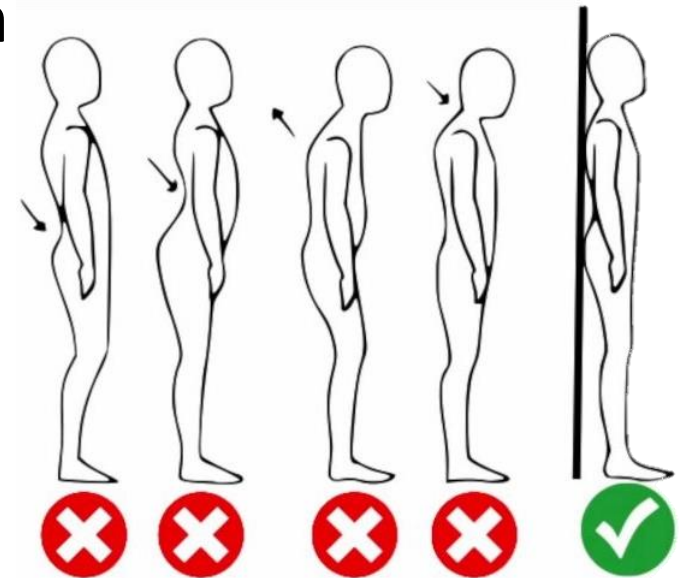
The body can message back



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- N.B. this channel is  ! The brain can send message to body, but body can also send message to brain

- Probably heard before that standing up straight, shoulders back, positive stance makes you feel more confident? And deliberately smiling makes you feel more cheerful?



- Same with anxiety... you can *use* body to tell brain there's nothing to worry about, that it can stand down and turn the alarm off!

Some techniques involving the body



Remember that the brain has told the body it's not safe. So almost any exercise can say back to the brain that in fact body is fine... and that both can calm down!

CHANGE YOUR STANCE, CHANGE YOUR STATE



And here are some exercises that are specifically helpful for up-tightness:

The shake and wake

Our music director gets the choir on its feet doing this one before every rehearsal – you sing much better if you're relaxed (and learn much better too)



- ✓ *Good for: settling children in the mornings; calming students before exams; getting ready to face work*

Aggressive relaxation

This sounds like a contradiction, but when we're full of adrenaline relaxation doesn't just 'happen'. Using a structured approach is much more effective, tensing and releasing each muscle in turn

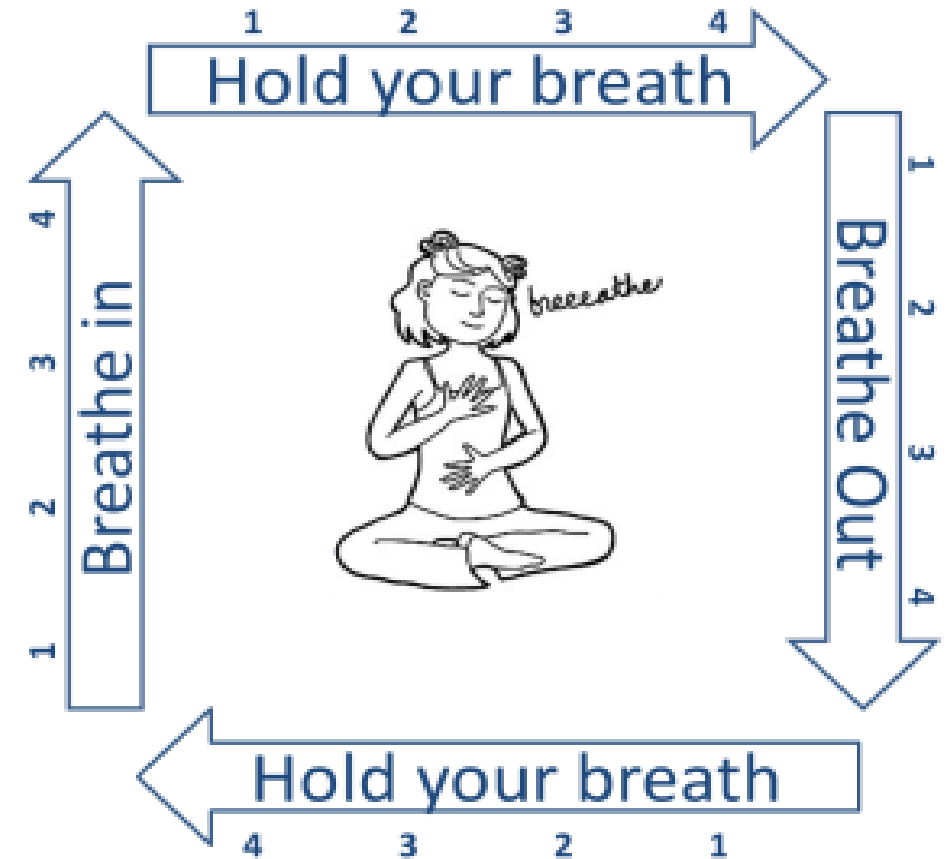
- ✓ *Good for: ongoing anxiety management; when you're going through a tough patch; doing before bed*





Square breathing

We understand that getting the breath under control is important when we or others are anxious, but often don't know how. This is a good technique for regulating oxygen intake



- ✓ *Good for: calming down; helping brain to 'think straight' again; preventing anxiety developing into panic*

Body technique (d)



Touch

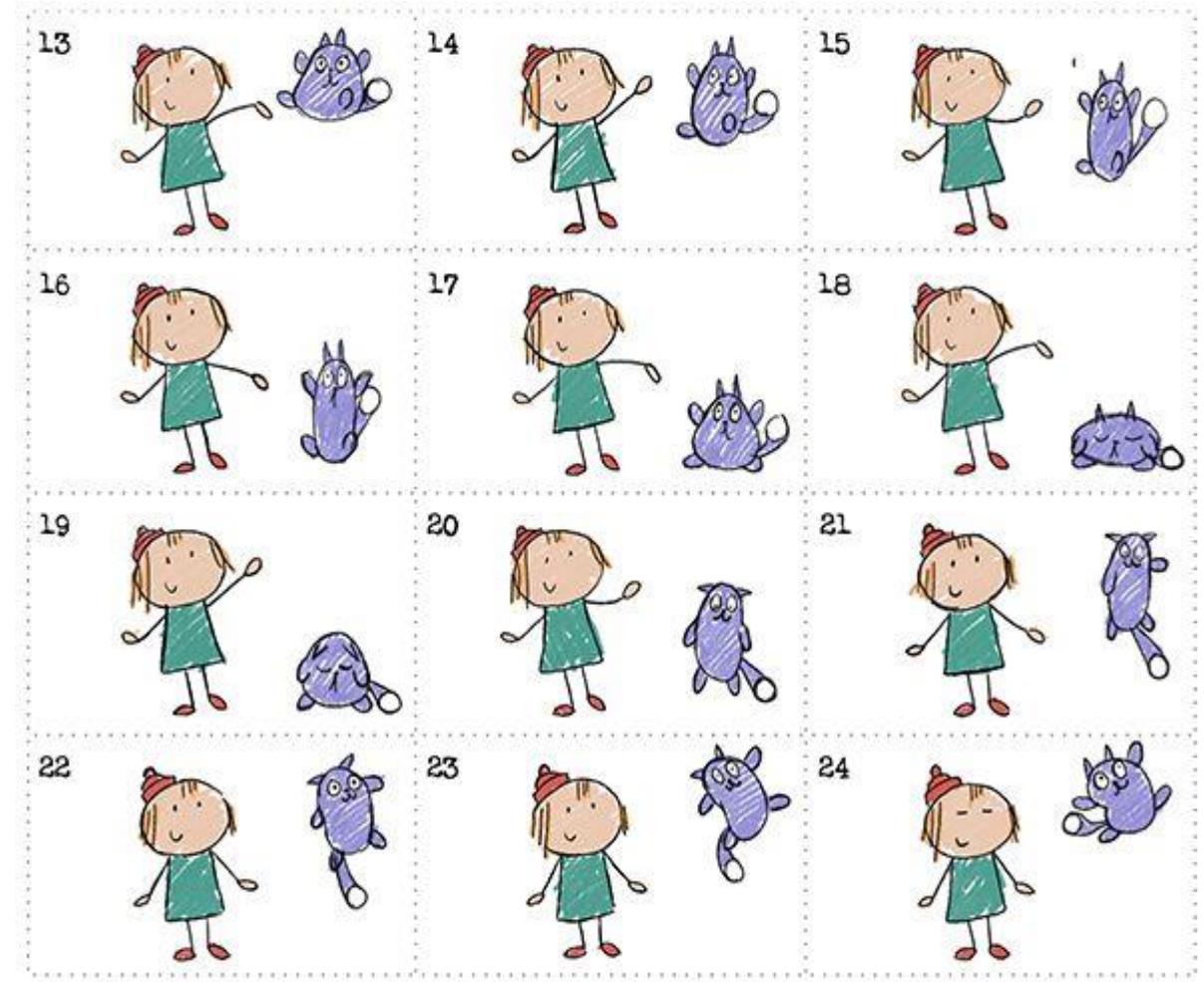
A steady hand on an arm or a shoulder floods the body with oxytocin and reduces cortisol; it communicates compassion like nothing else. You can also provide touch for yourself – crossing your arms over your chest helps the body understand its own boundaries

✓ *Good for: soothing someone very distressed; reducing trauma; providing comfort*



The ragdoll manoeuvre

No-one can panic if their muscles are all floppy! Best if you do this regularly so you have it in muscle memory and can summon it as a response

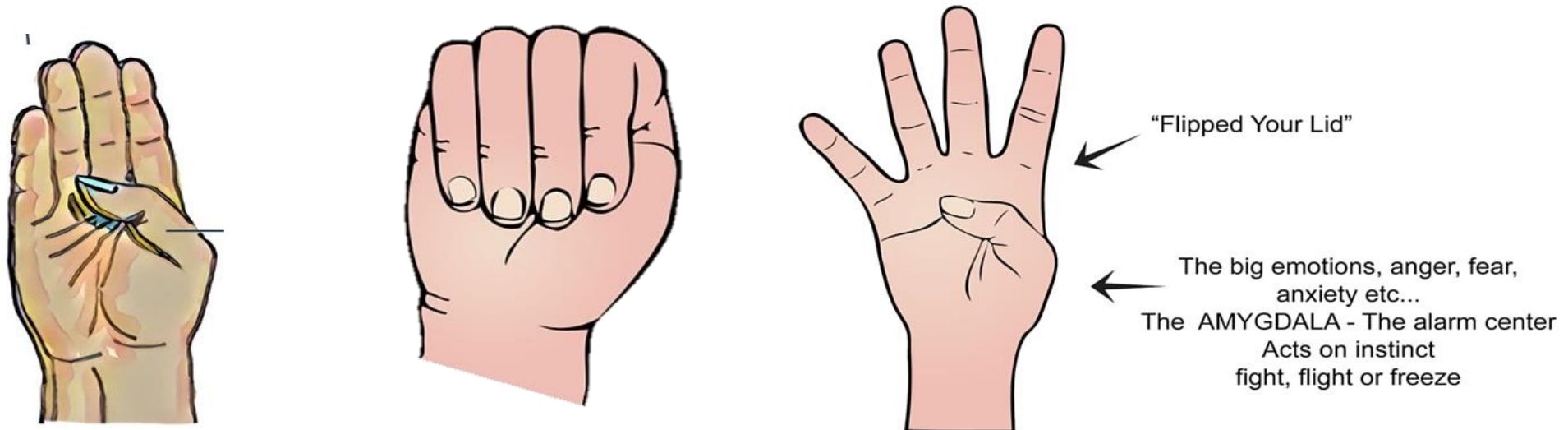


✓ *Good for: stopping a panic attack developing; calming down*

Understanding what happens in other parts of the brain



When you're really alarmed, all resources are diverted to the body; the processing part of the brain – the cortex – is almost literally disconnected. You **'flip your lid'** in other words!



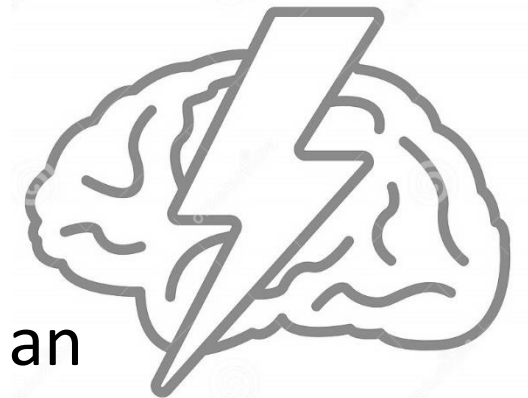
This is why people can't think straight and stumble over their words: logic and language centres are not priorities in an emergency!

Finding the 'over-ride' switch



However once first alarm is over, the processing 'thinking' cortex becomes vital in managing anxiety

- It helps you to sort through experiences and thoughts and let go of them
- You can also learn techniques to modify and train your reactions going forward
- Harnessing the brain's massive processing power gives you an 'over-ride button' for switching OFF the fight/flight response



Some techniques involving the brain (a-c)



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a) Tigers and butterflies



We're wired to see tigers, but we can *choose* to see the butterflies that are there too (look for the good in things, in other words). It starts to train the brain to understand that things can turn out all right

✓ *Good for: catastrophising; general mood*

b) Naming emotions



Saying 'I feel scared/ grumpy/ worried' etc literally moves the feeling to a different part of the brain, so you can think what to do about it

✓ *Good for: children; circular thinking; stuckness*

c) Separating the worry from the situation

It's not the interview/dark/party that's the problem – it's what the mind is *telling* you about it. Learning to think 'that's my worry brain talking' helps you sort fears from facts... often very different things!

✓ *Good for: empowering; restoring a feeling of control*



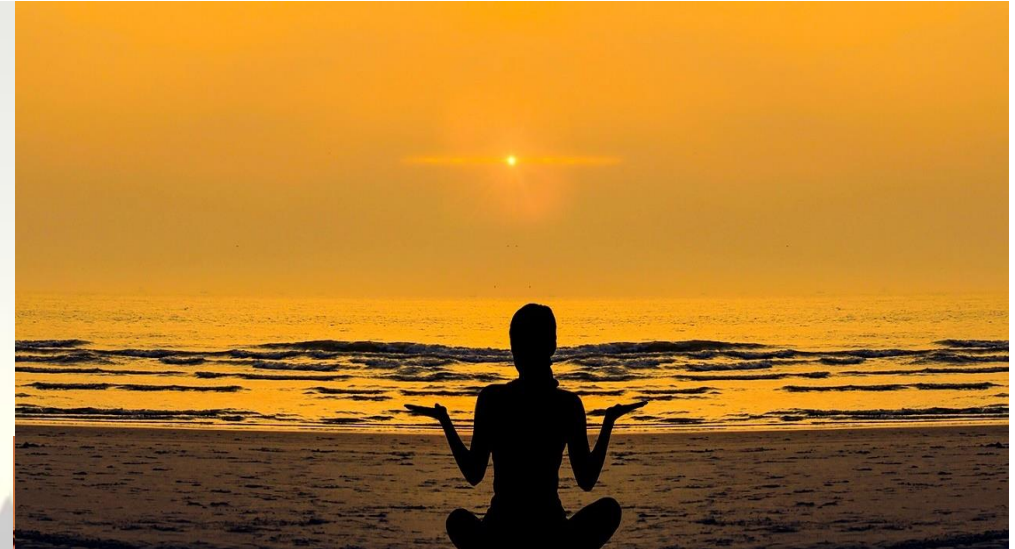
Brain technique (d)



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Getting to the front of the stadium

It's impossible to 'make thoughts go away', but you can push more relaxing thoughts in among them – e.g. a mantra or a peaceful image



✓ *Good for: breaking cycle of intrusive thoughts; calming the fight or flight response*

Gentle exposure

Experience is the magic key that unlocks the grip of worry and doubt. You get it by interacting with the thing(s) you're scared of, one small step at a time

✓ *Good for: calming fear;
increasing courage*

✓ ***ESSENTIAL for children!***



Photo credit: WikiHow

How to help with a panic attack



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1. Remember first and foremost it's a *bodily* response to a feeling of imminent danger – so **body needs to be made to feel safe first**
2. **Clear space around person**, or get them to somewhere quiet/uncrowded
3. **Keep voice very calm** and firm
4. **Don't ask questions** – they can't think straight and they might not even be able to hear you
5. **Stick to short, reassuring statements** – 'you're safe', 'it's OK', 'I've got you' – and keep repeating
6. **Touch can be very helpful**, as I said earlier. If it's someone you don't know well, offer to let them touch you – 'hold my hand if you like', 'here, hang on to me'
7. When they've calmed down a little, **get them to focus on you and breathe with you**
8. If their symptoms don't improve quite quickly (5-10 mins), **call an ambulance**

Some scenarios



A child who is always hesitant and fluttery – worried about going in to school; doesn't join in much. What do you do?

Remember it's about control. So no rescuing!! What can you give them that they can influence? Choose something – not too big – that they can conquer, which builds up tolerance and hence confidence.

Some scenarios



A friend or family member who catastrophises and fears the worst always. What do you do?

Their amygdala is on red alert, so a reality check can be really helpful. Gently ask them what they think is going to happen and why, and then whether they think that is really true, or is it anxiety talking?



You keep waking up feeling sick and having a horrible panic sensation when getting ready for work. What do you do?

Your brain is telling your body it's in danger and needs to escape, so any of: identifying the smoke source/ distraction/ getting to front of stadium/ square breathing/ aggressive relaxation... depends on whether you are more of a body person or a mind person

Thank you!



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