

Tool 1: Understanding Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a range of normal though unpleasant emotions. We can feel worried, nervous, uneasy, or we can feel extreme fear, panic or terror. Appropriate levels of anxiety are actually a helpful survival mechanism. Anxiety is designed to alert us to a situation that we need to respond to, if we do not respond there are usually negative consequences, we could be in danger or under threat.

These situations might include feeling anxious about an exam or presentation at work, for which we can respond to by preparing and practicing for. Anxiety also can be more sudden and acute in some circumstances such as when we are about to cross the road and we hear the beeping of a car before we step out. Our response is to jump out of the way to safety.

These examples highlight how anxiety provides the driving force behind motivation and keeps us safe from harmful situations. In this way anxiety is similar to physical pain. Pain keeps us safe from harm by telling us to remove our hand from a hot flame. Anxiety keeps us safe by ensuring we appropriately respond to dangerous, difficult or threatening situations. If we did not experience physical pain or anxiety how safe would we be?

The fight or flight response

The biological process that underpins anxiety is called 'the fight or flight response'. This response comes from the time our prehistoric ancestors when we relied heavily on our ability to fight or run away to survive (when confronted with a dangerous animal for example). In today's world we rely on anxiety less for these reasons, there aren't many sabre tooth tigers wandering around Hemel Hempstead or St Albans, but the response still remains.

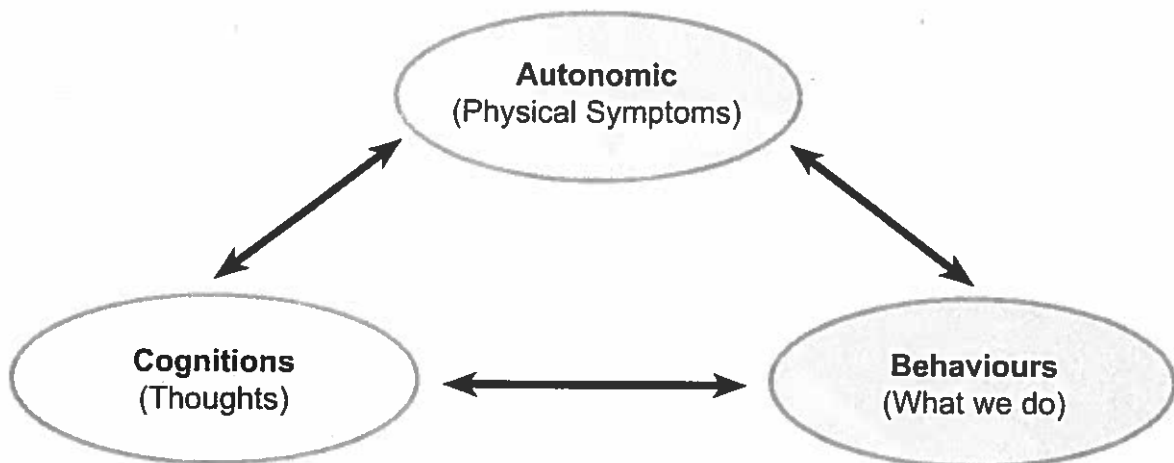
The fight or flight response is triggered when we perceive danger and the body prepares by releasing a chemical called adrenaline. See the table below for how adrenaline affects us.

Tool 2: The ABC A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Based Approach

What is CBT?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can help people look at the different situations that they find themselves in, and to understand their thoughts, physical sensations and behaviours. The idea is that our thoughts, physical symptoms and behaviour can all influence one another and therefore contribute in maintaining unhelpful moods such as low mood and anxiety. Take a look at the diagram below.

Situation



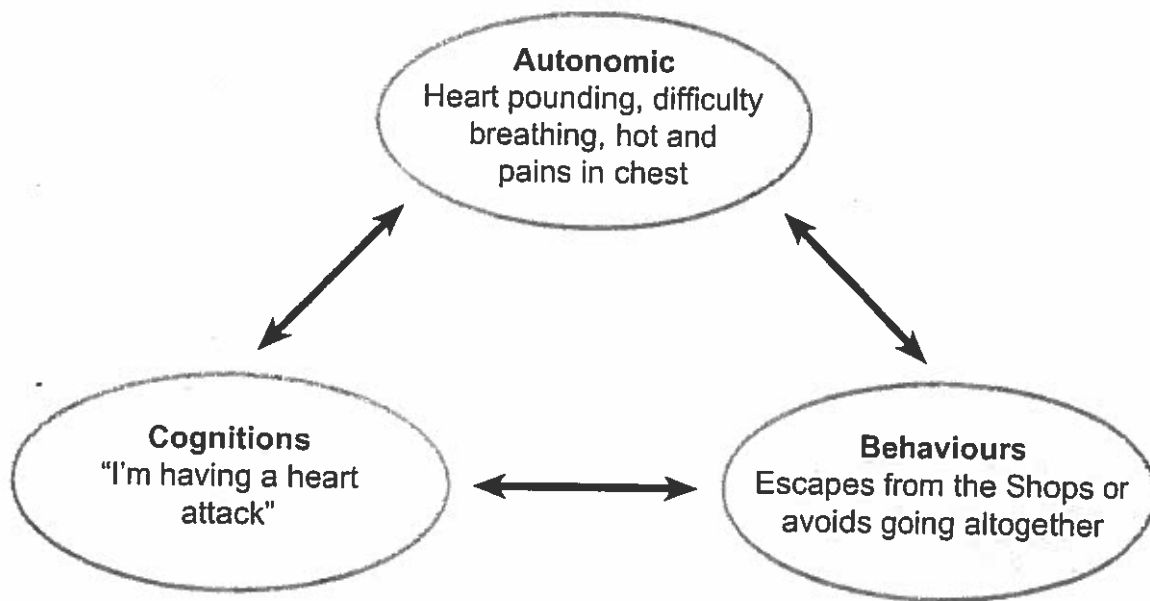
CBT emphasises that it is not necessarily the situation that causes the emotional distress that an individual experiences, but rather it is the individual's interpretation or view of that situation that leads to this. CBT works by learning how to challenge negative thoughts and learning how to change unhelpful behaviours.

When feeling low or anxious, it is common to have Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs). These are unhelpful thoughts that pop into our minds without any effort. With anxiety, NATs are often about overestimating threat and underestimating an individual's ability to cope, which can maintain anxiety. Sometimes people find coping mechanisms which help them deal with the situation. This may involve avoiding the situation, or doing something differently to help control their anxiety. Although this may lower their anxiety in the short term, it can actually maintain and reinforce it in the long term. Breaking this vicious cycle may cause an increase in anxiety to begin with but ultimately help reduce it.

The example below is of Lynda, who experiences anxiety when going to the shops. She notices her heart pounding, breathing difficulties and feeling hot. She thinks "I'm having a heart attack," which further contributes to her physical symptoms. As a result, she is now avoiding going to the shops, or escaping from them as quickly as she can. This can cause Lynda to feel even more anxious when next faced with this situation and will also strengthen her unhelpful thoughts. Her thoughts, physical symptoms and behaviours are all influenced by each other.

Lynda's ABC

Situation: Going to the shops



Safety Behaviors

Safety behaviors are actions carried out with the intention of preventing a feared catastrophe. In the short-term they often give a sense of relief, but in the long-term they are unhelpful because they prevent the disconfirmation of the beliefs that are maintaining anxiety.

What is a catastrophe?

Catastrophes can vary enormously, but tend to be about different kinds of threats to the individual, for example:

- Physical threat - "I'll be killed", "I'll be hurt"
- Psychological threat - "I'll go mad", "I can't cope"
- Social threat - "I'll embarrass myself and never be able to show my face again"; "They will think I'm an idiot"

What types of safety behaviors are there?

There are three types of safety behaviors:

1. *Avoidance* - e.g. not going to a feared situation
2. *Escape* - e.g. leaving a feared situation
3. *Subtle avoidance*, which can include things we do in our minds - e.g.
 - distraction - counting in my head during a panic to stop myself from going mad
 - calming my breathing - otherwise I'll be overwhelmed by my fear and lose control
 - averting my eyes - in case someone picks on me and I'm humiliated

What are the effects of safety behaviors?

- *Short term*: In the short term safety behaviors lead to a reduction in anxiety. Any form of escape or avoidance is often accompanied by a powerful feeling of relief. Relief is powerful negative reinforcer, and once an individual has learned that a safety behavior leads to relief they are likely to use it again.
- *Long term*: In the longer term, safety behaviors act to maintain anxiety by preventing the disconfirmation of unhelpful beliefs. For example, if someone has the belief "dogs will attack me and bite my face" and avoids dogs, they don't get the opportunity to learn that most dogs are friendly, or fail to learn the difference between friendly and unfriendly dogs.
- *Unintended consequences*: Safety behaviors often have unintended consequences which can reinforce the original belief, make the anxiety worse, or lead to other problems.

Early experience	Belief	Safety behavior	Consequences		
			Short term	Long term	Unintended
Humiliated at school about appearance	If people see my armpits they will think I am disgusting and reject me	Keep arms at my sides	Reduction in anxiety because no-one can see my armpits	No opportunities to learn that most people don't even notice sweat	Keeping arms at my sides makes armpits sweat even more
Physically assaulted by a group of men while walking home	People are dangerous, if I make eye contact I will be attacked	Avert my eyes to avoid eye contact	Feel slightly safer when around people	Fail to learn that eye contact does not generally lead to being attacked	People think that I am odd
Many experiences of unwanted attention by men, and an experience of sexual assault	The attacks were my fault, if I don't look conventionally attractive then I won't get attacked again	Overeat, pay less attention to my appearance	Feels good to be acting in accordance with my beliefs - feel a bit safer at times	No opportunities to learn that attacks were not my fault, and that not all unwanted attention is a precursor to an attack	Unconventional appearance may lead to more unwanted attention

What is the difference between a safety behavior and adaptive behavior?

Just by looking at the behavior itself, there is no way of telling the difference between an unhelpful safety behavior and a helpful adaptive behavior. It is the *intention* which matters - safety behaviors are those which are *intended* to avert a feared catastrophe. For example, if the strategy of distraction is used to cope with a painful experience (e.g. a visit to the dentist) we say it is helpful. However, if distraction is used with the *intention* of preventing a catastrophe (e.g. to avoid a feeling of panic that I fear will make me go mad) then it can be viewed as an unhelpful safety behavior.