

# Appendix IV

## Physical Effects of Anxiety and How to Manage Them

### What effects does anxiety have on the body?

When we get anxious, our whole body changes in various ways. This is an evolutionary feature and goes back to the days when we lived in caves and needed to either run from predators or fight them in some way.

The changes in our bodies when we get anxious are mainly caused by the hormone adrenaline, which is released from the adrenal glands which sit on top of the kidneys. When something makes us anxious, adrenaline is immediately released into the bloodstream and is thus taken round the body, reaching every organ.

In this way, changes in the body happen in order to prepare the body for 'fight' or 'flight'. The heart beats more quickly in order to pump blood round the body; breathing quickens so that oxygen can be breathed in and taken round the body in the bloodstream; blood is diverted from organs such as the stomach to legs and arms to prepare the body to run away or fight (this may explain the butterfly sensations in the stomach when feeling nervous); muscles tense ready for action. All these changes are very useful if faced with a real physical danger, such as a lion about to pounce. Generally though, in these times, our anxieties often include things that do not require us to run away. The physical symptoms are then just felt in the body and can be very uncomfortable.

### How to help the physical effects of anxiety

#### *Slow the breathing down*

Notice how quickly you are breathing when you are feeling panicky and take just one deep breath in and try and hold it for a slow count of 3 before exhaling as slowly as possible ... this can help to slow the breathing down in the first instance ... then just try to relax the muscles as much as possible and place one hand just below the ribs ... breathe in gently through your nose now and hopefully you will feel your hand move forward, meaning you are breathing deeply ... Breathe out now through your mouth ... and in ... slowly and gently ... imagining just below your ribs is a big red balloon, inflating and deflating ... Try and keep movement in the chest to a minimum as breathing from the chest is generally shallow breathing and this can cause physical discomfort ... Keep this regular rhythm going ... slow, deep and gentle breaths, aiming for about eight to twelve breaths a minute with breathing in and out counting as one breath ... Just keep this gentle rhythm going now, gentle breaths, aiming for about eight to twelve breaths a minute with breathing in and out counting as one breath ... Just keep this gentle rhythm going now ... It may take a while to get used to this new rhythm but, when you have, you will find that your breathing is generally more relaxed ... okay, when you are ready, become aware of your surroundings again and open your eyes ... How was that?

#### *Relax the body*

Sitting down and starting with the feet, point the toes for a count of three ... and relax ... and now pull the toes towards the ceiling for a count of three ... and relax ... point the toes again and feel the tension in the calves ... and

relax ... bend the knees ... and relax ... push the lower legs out to tense the thigh muscles ... and relax ... moving up to the shoulders ... shrug them up and down ... and relax ... then bend the arms at the elbow to tense the upper arms ... and relax ... moving down to the hands, make them into fists and squeeze ... and relax ... and moving up to the face, scrunch it up ... and relax ... and now bring the head forwards ... and back ... and relax.

### *Use grounding techniques*

Tell yourself that the reason you are feeling so bad is because you feel anxious. Recognising anxious feelings is the first step in learning how to cope with them.

#### 1. Start to ground yourself:

- Stamp your feet.
- Carry a 'grounding' object around with you, a comforting item such as a rounded stone, a small soft toy, a lavender bag; squeeze it when you are feeling in distress to bring you back to the present.
- Use breathing/relaxation techniques.
- Make contact with yourself: notice how parts of the body feel, starting with the feet and working upwards. Do you feel hot? Cold? Numb? Energetic? Restless? You can also try just touching parts of your body or shaking your body in order to try and re-engage with yourself.
- Think of a calming image, one which helps you to feel in control and safe, such as a peaceful garden, a beach scene or a walk through the countryside. It is useful to practise summoning up this image when you are feeling relaxed, as this will make it much easier to access when you are feeling panicky.
- Think of a grounding phrase: a few words to remind you that you are surviving in the present. Examples might be 'I am in Bristol, it is Tuesday today' or 'I am strong and will go on surviving'. Some people actually write these kinds of statements down on pieces of card and keep them in their pockets for 'emergencies'.

#### 2. Use each of the senses to make contact with the environment around you:

- Sight: use your eyes to engage with the world. Look at the different colours around you, as well as the shapes, light and shade.
- Hearing: listen to the sounds you hear, including voices, traffic noise, birds singing, etc.
- Touch: use your sense of touch to make contact with the ground, the chair you are sitting on, plants, etc. Notice the temperature and any different textures around you.
- Taste: try sucking a sweet or having a warming drink.
- Smell: use your nose to smell what's around you, including car exhaust fumes, flowers and perfume.

### *Use distraction techniques*

- Counting – e.g. counting back in 3s from 200; counting backwards from 100.
- Counting cars (or anything else) – e.g. counting the number of red cars you see go past or the number of people wearing boots (this could be inappropriate for people with obsessive compulsive tendencies).
- Visualising a lovely place – really imagining it with all the senses.
- Remembering a pleasant memory – in lots of detail.
- Focusing on breathing slowly.