



## **Anxiety, Worry, Stress, Panic and Fear In Children: Are They All The Same?**

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# Agenda

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- Introduction
- Overview on Anxiety and anxiety related disorders
- Q & A

# What is Anxiety?

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- How do you know if you have anxiety?
- What signals does your body give when you are nervous or worried about something?
- What causes anxiety?
- Is anxiety and stress similar?



# Anxiety

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The American Psychological Association (APA) defines anxiety as “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure.”

Anxiety is a complex response to perceive or real threat that involve changes in how we think, act and feel (cognition, behavior/bodily responses and emotion).

People struggling with anxiety have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns that affects their functioning.

# Anxiety

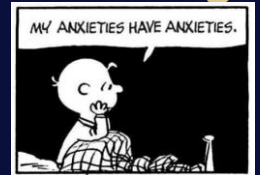
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Through evolution, humans have developed important skills to ensure safety and protection. We're born with the instinctive "fight or flight" response that helped our ancestors flee from predators and other threats.

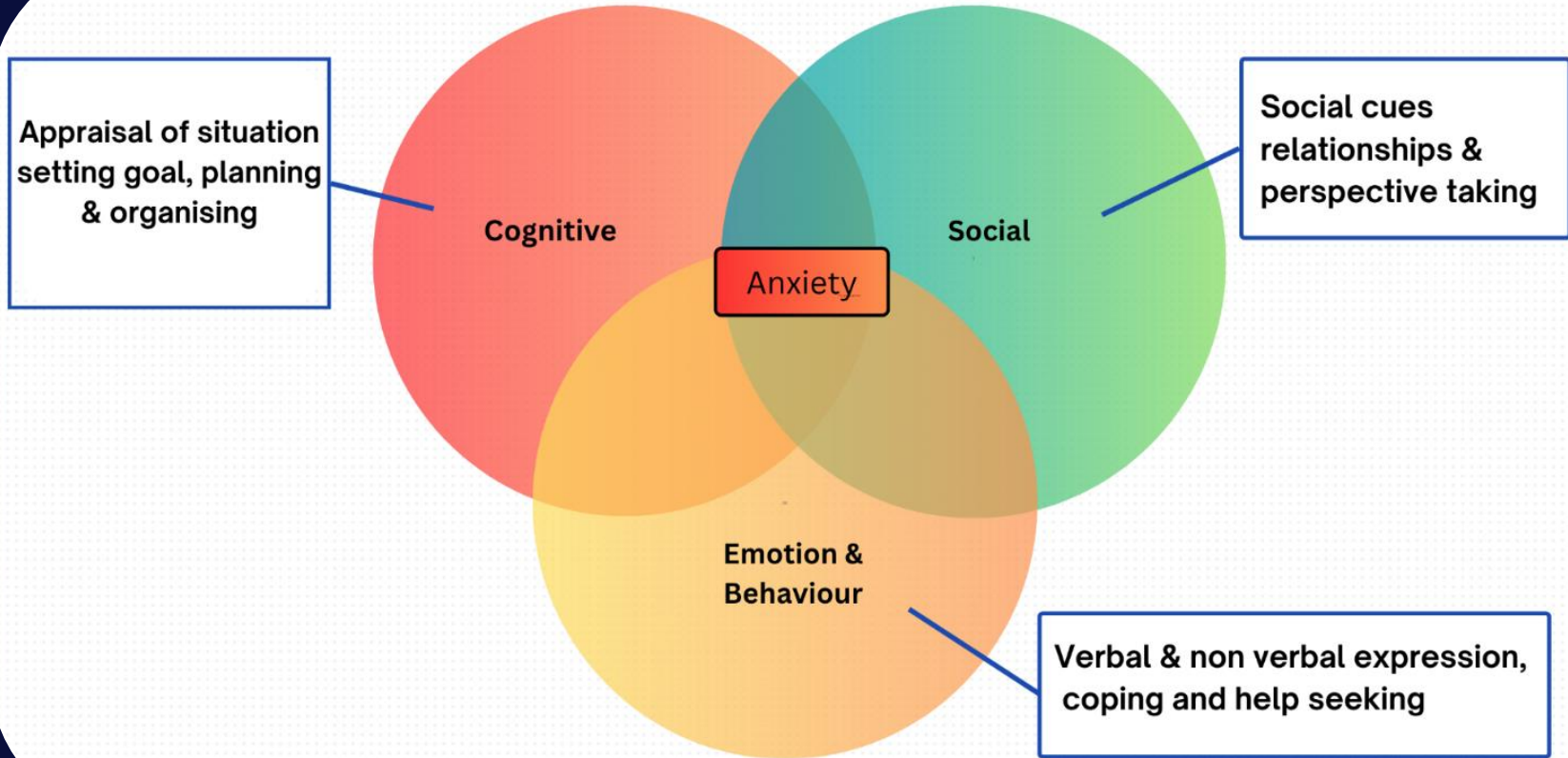
When afraid, concerned, or stressed, our brain responsible for the fight or flight response will generate the nervous, fearful sensation we call *anxiety*.

While it's normal for everyone experiences anxiety; children with anxiety disorders struggle with excessive worrying will trigger a wave of physical and psychological responses that can be uncomfortable and distressing affecting their day to day functioning.

What happens when we get scared?



# How anxiety are activated?



# The Limbic System:

## Processing stressful events in the brain

These components in the Limbic System help process stressful events. They work together to help the brain determine whether something is stressful and triggers stress responses in the body.

## Amygdala & Hippocampus

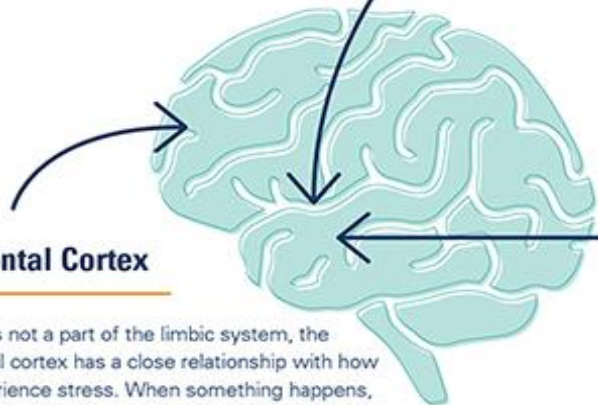
If something is seen as a threat or a stressor, the amygdala triggers the fight-flight response in the brain. Then it tells the hippocampus to remember everything about it, shaping our future response to similar events. Because of this, people who suffer more trauma are more likely to react poorly to stressors.

## Prefrontal Cortex

While it's not a part of the limbic system, the prefrontal cortex has a close relationship with how we experience stress. When something happens, information gets sent here for us to process the event on a more intellectual level - with logic and evaluation skills. Using those, we develop a response. But stress can disrupt the prefrontal cortex, making it harder to make good decisions.

## Hypothalamus

After the Amygdala triggers the fight-flight response, the hypothalamus carries it out. It sends a message to your adrenal glands to release adrenaline and cortisol. Cortisol is a hormone that causes stress reactions throughout the body. If you're constantly in a fight-flight state, these hormones will do great damage to your body.



## The Limbic System

# How avoidance works when anxiety occurs?

High Anxiety

Medium Anxiety

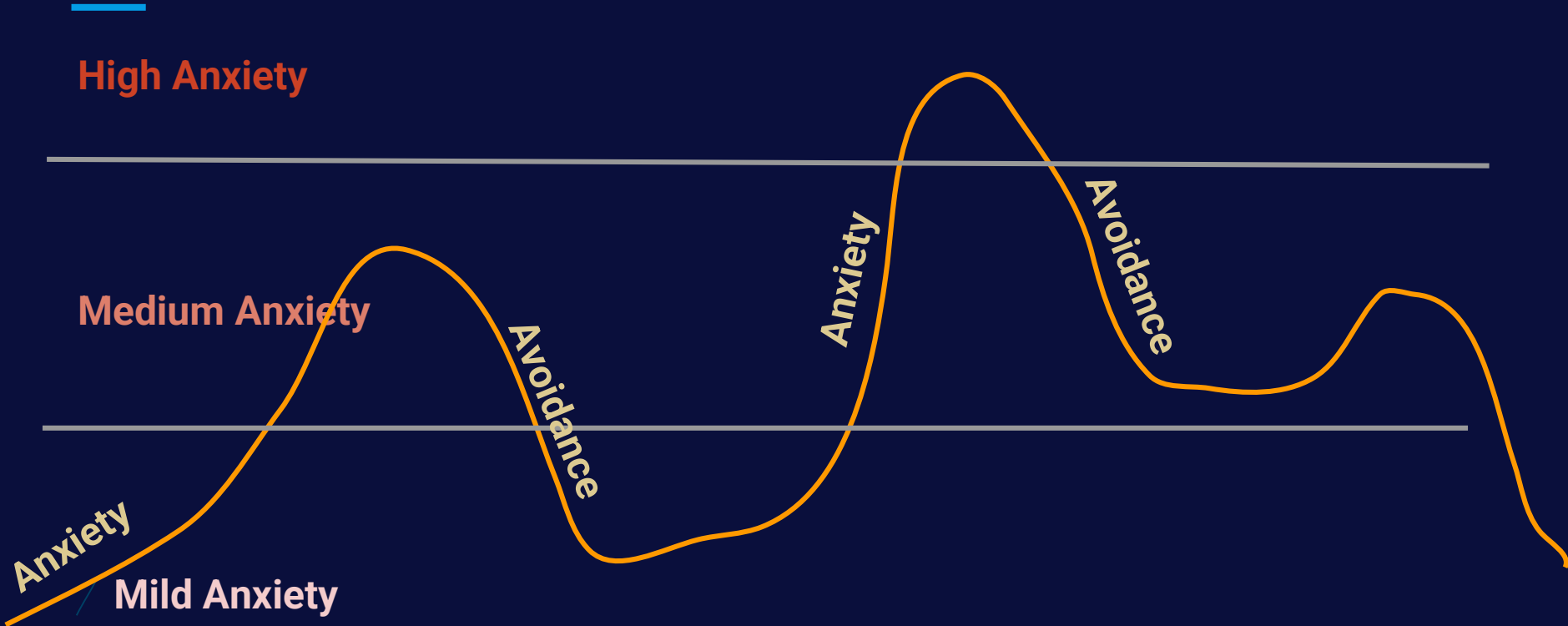
Anxiety

Mild Anxiety

Avoidance

Anxiety

Avoidance





# Anxiety?



- While both anxiety and stress are emotional responses.
- Stress is used to describe how people feel when they are overtaxed and overwhelmed with pressures from the vicissitudes (ups & downs) of life.
- Stress is triggered by external situations (e.g. work, academic pressures, peer conflict, etc). It maybe one-time, short-term occurrence, or repeatedly over a period of time.
- Both stress and anxiety exhibits similar symptoms. Persons under stress can experience both physical and mental symptoms. It's often used interchangeably- For the externalized symptoms. (e.g. fatigue, headache, muscle aches, digestive problems, irritability and sleep disruption)
- Anxiety can linger even when the stressor is no longer present.



# I'M SO STRESSED OUT!

## Is it stress or anxiety?

### Stress

- Generally is a response to an *external* cause, such as taking a big test or arguing with a friend.
- Goes away once the situation is resolved.
- Can be positive or negative. For example, it may inspire you to meet a deadline, or it may cause you to lose sleep.

### Both Stress and Anxiety

Both stress and anxiety can affect your mind and body. You may experience symptoms such as:

- Excessive worry
- Uneasiness
- Tension
- Headaches or body pain
- High blood pressure
- Loss of sleep

### Anxiety

- Generally is *internal*, meaning it's your reaction to stress.
  - Usually involves a persistent feeling of apprehension or dread that doesn't go away, and that interferes with how you live your life.
- Is constant, even if there is no immediate threat.

# Difference Between Anxiety and Normal Worry

## Anxiety

- ✓ It often happens out of the blue.
- ✓ It's persistent, even if there's no real threat.
- ✓ It interferes with daily life, keeping you from socializing, working or sleeping.



## Normal worry

- ✓ Nervousness is tied to a specific cause, such as an upcoming test or work deadline.
- ✓ It's fleeting and usually passes when the challenge is over.
- ✓ It doesn't interfere with daily life.

# Fear

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## What is fear?

**Fear is one of the most basic forms of human emotions. It's hard wired in our nervous system that acts as an early warning system that something dangerous is about to occur, prompting us to take immediate actions.**

**It's similar to an instinct where our body immediately reacts to an unpleasant situation. The main function of fear is to ensure our safety and survival. It alerts us to impending danger and prepares us to mobilise our resources to deal with it.**

**Fear is used to describe our emotional reaction that is something unsafe but it's commonly used to describe something we're afraid of.**

# Worry

**Internalizing negative feelings & thoughts clouds our perception and judgement**

**Overthinking about something negative or bad will only perpetuate feelings of helplessness**

**It's a vicious cycle that prevent us from resolving our problems. It in fact makes it worse**

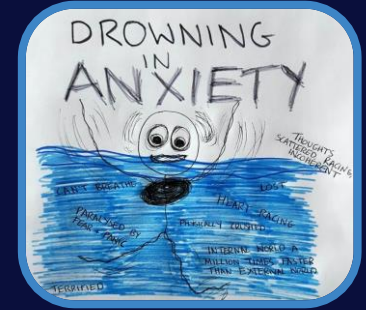
worrying won't stop  
the bad stuff from happening  
it just stops you  
from enjoying the good.



# Signs of Anxiety in Children

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- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Restlessness**
- **Irritability/ Grumpiness**
- **Crying spells**
- Constantly worrying, harbour negative thoughts
- Disruption of normal routines at home and at school
- Avoidance
- Complaints of physical/ psychosomatic symptoms
- Grinding teeth/ picking skin
- Loss of appetites
- Anhedonia or lost of interest in usual activities that brings pleasure or joy



# Anxiety

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## Symptoms (what our body is experiencing physically )

- Stomach ache/ constipation/ loose stools
- Headache/ nausea (e.g. spinning sensation)
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches
- Difficulty with concentration
- Difficulty breathing- hyperventilating
- Vomiting or dry heaving- can be related to chronic medical issue
- Sweaty palms
- Sleep disruption/ Insomnia
- Irritability
- Fast/ irregular heartbeat
- Changes in appetite

# Additional Features of Anxiety

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- **Feeling tense, nervous and restless**
- **Unable to relax**
- **Sense of foreboding or dread**
- **Feeling heavy or weight on one's shoulders**
- **Needing reassurance or validation**
- **Worrying and ruminating over specific incidents**
- **Developing unrealistic fears**
- **Low mood**



# Overview of different types of Anxiety

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- **Generalized Anxiety**
- **Separation Anxiety**
- **Panic Disorder**
- **Social Anxiety**
- **Selective mutism**

# Generalized Anxiety Disorder



- **Children experienced repeated and uncontrollable worry about events**
- **They may feel anxious in one or multiple settings (e.g. schools, hospitals, malls, park) and have difficulty calming themselves**
- **Children express worries for many reasons:**
  - **Something terrible may happen to them or loved ones**
  - **Unexpected change in routines and schedules**
  - **Past negative experiences may resurface through loose associations**
  - **Past behaviors and incidents (vomiting in the bus due feeling dizzy and the kids laughed at me)**
  - **Personal abilities/ School performance (I can't sing as well as my classmates or swim as fast as others)**

# Separation Anxiety



**Separation anxiety disorder is diagnosed when symptoms are excessive for the developmental age and cause significant distress in daily functioning. Symptoms may include:**

- **Recurrent and excessive distress about anticipating or being away from home or loved ones**
- **Constant, excessive worry about losing a parent or other loved one to an illness or a disaster (fear may or may not be real)**
- **Constant worry that something bad will happen, such as being lost causing separation from parents or other loved ones**
- **Refusing to be away from home because of fear of separation**

# Separation Anxiety

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- **Not wanting to be home alone and without a parent or other loved one in the house**
- **Reluctance or refusing to sleep away from home without a parent or other loved one nearby**
- **Repeated nightmares about separation**
- **Frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches or other symptoms when separation from a parent or other loved one is anticipated**

[What is separation anxiety?](#)

# Panic Disorder

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**Children and adolescents with panic disorder have unexpected and repeatedly experience intense fear or discomfort. It's common for children to avoid places or activities that will trigger panic attacks. It can have a negative impact on psychosocial and academic difficulties.** Panic attacks are sometimes unexpected and comes quickly. It can last for few minutes up to an hour.

- **Report intense fearfulness**
- **Intense feelings of dread or impending doom**
- **Desire to escape from fearful situations**
- **Racing heart beat**
- **Shaking or trembling**
- **shortness of breath or hyperventilating**
- **Dizziness/ lightheadedness**
- **Feeling the world is not real**

# Social Anxiety

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People will experience symptoms of anxiety and fear in situations or places that they may be judged or scrutinized (e.g. Performance such singing, public speaking, job interviews, meeting new people.)

They are fine when they are around close friends and family as well in familiar environment where they feel comfortable and less likely to be judged by others.

# Selective Mutism

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- When a child is persistently not speaking at certain social situations (e.g. school)
- Typically, the child is able to speak without difficulty in situations and places they feel comfortable and secure.
- Genetic predisposition for anxiety
- This is more commonly found in children
- Failure to speak is not due to lack of knowledge or of comfort of language use
- This can interfere with social communication but children find ways to communicate nonverbally

# The Benefits of Anxiety

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- **Alert**
- **Attention**
- **Prepare**
- **Communicate**
- **Protection**



The upside of anxiety