

AFRAID? ANXIOUS? WORRIED?

These are normal and understandable responses to stressful situations which we experience as threatening. Such feelings often result from finding it difficult to know what to do or how to cope with what is happening. These emotions can be very useful as they make us aware of danger.

Sometimes, however, they appear to be irrational responses as the source of threat or danger is not obvious. Both anxiety and fear can become disabling when their effects are so intense that they interfere with our ability to deal with day to day events.

For example, they may result in panic attacks, generalised anxiety or phobias. Phobias involve fear of things or situations which are not really dangerous and therefore involve an unrealistic assessment of the danger involved.

So what is fear?

The 'fight or flight' reaction triggered by fear is a pattern of chemical, physical and psychological changes that prepares us to cope with what we experience as a threatening situation.

When we experience fear, adrenaline is pumped into the bloodstream. This can result in more powerful heartbeats, called palpitations, sweating, over-breathing, tension and muscle pain, nausea or fainting.

Such effects can be easily mistaken for serious illness by those experiencing them. This in itself can lead to an escalation of these symptoms. Fear and anxiety can also make us feel confused and scared. This can result from what we tell ourselves about our ability to cope with the threatening situation.

Telling ourselves that we can't cope or are going to fail often impacts on our actual behaviour. We may start avoiding things, fidgeting, shouting, stuttering, becoming aggressive or crying.

What are your fears?

- Fears expressed by students may include the fear of failure, disapproval and rejection. This results from associating one's self-worth with external success, expecting oneself to be perfect, failing to take into consideration one's own needs and wants, assuming responsibility for others' feelings and harsh self-criticism.
- A fear of competition and success can also often be experienced by students when competition is viewed as a means of comparing oneself with others and not as a challenge and motivation to do one's best.

- Fear of change may also be experienced when there is an overestimation of the chances of disaster. Change is perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity to have new experiences. It also relates to self-esteem being bound up in one's surroundings.
- A fear of intimacy can also be an issue for many. This usually stems from negative early experiences, for example an abusive environment, which discourages closeness in the present. It entails associating vulnerability with weakness and inferiority. This in turn can lead to attempts to either control or avoid people.

How can we cope better with fear and anxiety?

There are several methods for coping with the physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to fear.

These include:

- Dealing with the physical symptoms of fear including the use of relaxation and breathing exercises.
- Assertiveness training.
- Controlling those aspects of the fearful situation that can be controlled.

This may include, for example, the choice of a 'task' that matches the individual's preferences and talents, dealing with procrastination, preparing material thoroughly or sharing experiences with friends and associates.

- Dealing with fear-provoking thoughts.
- Counselling may help you to develop strategies to manage your fears. It may also help you to understand and process any underlying issues or meanings of your fears. Becoming aware of our fears - becoming conscious of what we feel and listening to what we tell ourselves about our ability to cope - can help greatly in overcoming our fears and anxieties.

Here are some methods to help do this.

Become aware of your fears

1. Make a list of all your current life situations which trigger fear. Rank the fearful experiences in order, from the least to the most fear-producing, on a scale from 0-100. For example, "being alone at night because your flatmate is working late" might be ranked 55 points, and "making a presentation in class", 70 points. Start with the least fearful and construct a vivid image of it.
2. Record your fear-producing thoughts. Write down your thoughts about the event, including subjective assumptions, beliefs, judgements and predictions. Record what you say to yourself about your worth.
3. Dispute your self-talk, what you are saying about yourself. Look for supporting data of your fear-provoking thoughts, from direct experience, indirect experience and rumour. Ask questions such as "Where is the evidence for this idea? Where is this written? Is there any support for my belief?"

4. Imagine the worst case. Ask questions such as "What is the worst thing that could happen? What are the worst consequences if the worst thing happened? How tolerable would the consequences be? How likely is it that the worst will happen? What good things may occur?"

5. Replace the statements you recorded under task 2 with more reasonable, objective, statements.

Work on writing a list of coping thoughts for the following four stages of coping:

Preparation - "I've succeeded with this before".

Confronting the fear situation - "No need to rush", "Take it step by step", "I can do this".

Coping with fear - "I'm only afraid because I choose to be", "Keep my mind on the task at hand".

Reinforcing success - "I did well! It's possible not to be afraid. All I have to do is stop thinking I'm afraid".

Further support on anxiety is available at [SpunOut.ie](https://www.spunout.ie)