

COPING WITH ANXIETY AND STRESS

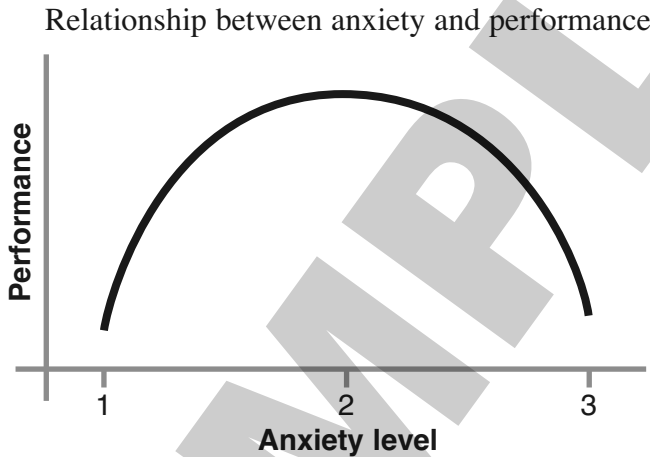
Dr. Simon Enright

Consultant Clinical Psychologist
Berkshire Healthcare NHS FT

UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND ANXIETY

Some Stress and Anxiety is Normal and Necessary

A certain amount of anxiety and stress is normal and necessary to perform any task properly. For example it is unlikely that we will cross a road safely if we aren't slightly anxious about the traffic. However too much or too little anxiety will always make us less effective in what we are doing. This information is simplified in the following graph.



The three different levels of anxiety shown each will have a different affect on our performance. This can be applied to any task, from playing tennis, taking exams, or working. If anxiety is too low or too high then our performance will be made worse, but between these extremes lies a level of anxiety that enables us to perform at our best.

Our Individual Capacity to Cope with Stress

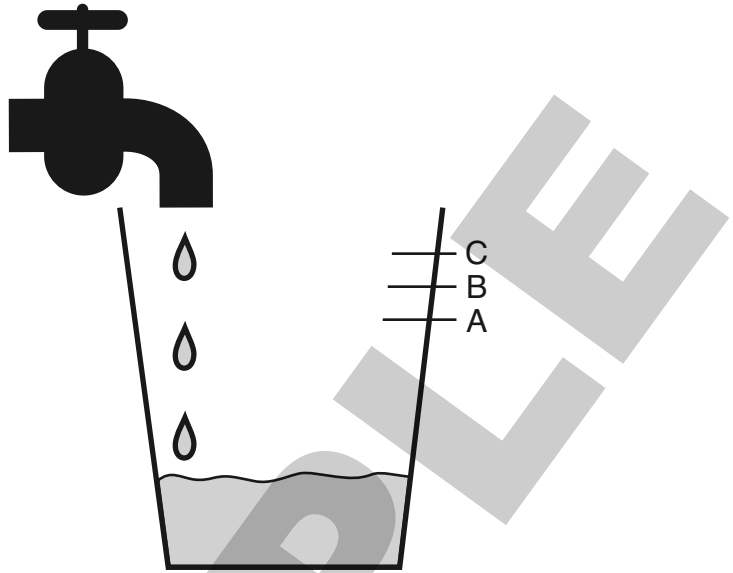
Despite the fact that some anxiety is normal and necessary to perform any task, it is usually the case that problems arise because levels of stress have become too high. Regardless of who we are or what we do all of us have a limit to the amount of stress that we can cope with.

The simplest way to think about this limit is to imagine that you have a glass inside your body which represents your capacity for stress. Since all of us have a different capacity for stress everybody's glass is different. We can think about stress a rather like a tap that is constantly hovering over our glass dripping in stress. When we are calm and relaxed the tap is virtually turned off, the more stress that we are under the more the tap drips. Our stress taps are just as personal to us as our stress glass. What turns on the tap for one person may not necessarily be a stress for somebody else.

Symptoms as Signals

As the level of stress rises in the glass it becomes increasingly likely that our bodies will begin to produce symptoms in order to signal to us that the level is getting too high. These signals are designed to make us do something about the stress level. The actual symptoms that we experience will depend upon our own make up, no two people's responses to stress will be exactly the same. The point at which we experience these signals will of course depend upon the rate of flow of stress and the size and shape of our stress glass, that is, it will depend upon our own unique make up.

Gradually as the stress levels rise they will eventually reach a level where the body begins to warn us that we are under too much stress. In the diagram over this is shown as point A. It is here that we first start to get unpleasant symptoms which are difficult to ignore. Some of the more common symptoms include: Headaches, chest pains, sleep problems, changes in mood, nausea, feelings of unreality, tiredness, sexual problems, increase in worrying, irritability and anger, increased use of the toilet, etc.



It is very important that we all learn how our own bodies respond to stress. Then we will be able to respond to the signal early on and do something to prevent the stress levels from continuing to go up. In many ways we can also count ourselves lucky that our bodies respond to stress with these particular warning signals. Some less fortunate people develop other symptoms such as ulcers, increased blood pressure, and heart disease.

If the signal is ignored at point A, that is, the person does nothing to reduce their stress, then the tap will keep dripping and continue to fill the glass to point B. Here the original symptoms may get more severe or a new symptom may develop to provide another signal of the need for action. Again, if this is also ignored, the level will continue to go on rising to point C and so on. In this way someone suffering from long term stress may have experienced several different symptoms before they eventually seek help.

Our stress taps can cause the glass to fill up for lots of reasons. It may have occurred very slowly over a number of years where stress has been continuous. Common situations like this include work which is over

demanding, family members have been chronically ill, financial problems have built up, or the children have been going through a difficult phase. Under these circumstances people often describe their stress symptoms starting 'out of the blue'. They say 'nothing has changed, I've been living like this for some time'. This may be true but now the stress has caught up with them. The final few drops of stress over the last few weeks on top of all the other stress which has accumulated over years have now brought the level to point A.

Other events can cause our stress taps to turn on much more quickly. Here the glass fills rapidly and symptoms can come on very quickly. This might occur for instance in a car accident, on hearing very upsetting news, or when having to face things that we are most afraid of. At such times it is usually easier to understand our why stress reactions occurred, though these may still be very unpleasant.

It is very important to remember that our signals of stress are not simply based on the stresses of the moment. Obviously if your stress glass has been full for a long time it won't take much to start the symptom signals. If the glass is relatively empty then we can cope with much more.

Panic Attacks are One type of Stress Signal

One of the most frightening of all of the possible symptoms signals of stress is the combination of physical symptoms experienced in a panic attack. Their onset is very rapid and sudden, with little or no warning. Panic attacks are very common with approximately 1 in 10 adults having had them. For those that do their frequency can vary from once yearly, to many times a day.

For anyone who has never had a panic attack it may be difficult to fully understand what the sufferer goes through, but it may help to get an idea from the following scene. Imagine that you are shopping at your local supermarket. You are happily filling your trolley with the weeks groceries when you turn the corner into the next aisle and suddenly you see a roaring lion, open mouthed with glistening teeth, heading straight for you.

Of course you'd be panic stricken; your heart would be beating wildly, you'd sweat profusely, shake, feel faint, and without further thought you'd be running away as fast as you could.

Now imagine turning into the same aisle in the supermarket, all those same bodily reactions start and yet there's nothing there - no lion, nothing. Your heart is beating frantically, you feel faint and dizzy, sweating, shaking, wanting to run away and yet there's nothing there to be afraid of. What would you think? 'I'm going mad...I'm having a heart attack...I'm dying.....I'm going to be sick or faint.....I'm going to make a fool of myself'. Most of us would probably have these terrifying thoughts, run out of the situation and call our doctors. This is often exactly what the panic attack victim does when they have no idea what is happening to them.

Unfortunately it is exactly these thoughts and actions which make our panic attacks worse. We become terrified of having another and we begin to avoid every possible situation where it might happen again. The more we anticipate having another panic attack the more likely it is to happen.

Understanding a Panic Attack - The Fight or Flight Response

Everybody has probably at some time or another in their lives experienced the 'fight or flight' response, also called the 'alarm reaction'. Imagine the physical feelings associated with being high up a ladder and feeling it slipping, or being in a 'near miss' in a car. These feelings are the bodies natural response to prepare us to cope with danger or sudden threat. This response is entirely automatic, we don't need to think about it to make it happen.

In order to understand the importance of the fight or flight response. it is useful to think back many thousands of years to the times when human beings lived as cavemen. Imagine the following scene: A caveman leaves his cave one day setting out to hunt for food. On his travels he comes to a large bush behind which he hears rustling and sudden movement, obviously that of an animal. Immediately the caveman must be prepared for one of two possibilities; first, it may be a rabbit or other small animal

making the noise. In that case the caveman would have to be very alert to dive into the bush or run after the animal to catch it and kill it for food. Second, the rustling may be that of a lion or another dangerous animal. Now the caveman must be prepared either to run away or defend himself from attack.

In both circumstances we can see that the caveman must be ready for 'fight' and/or 'flight'. This bodily preparation must occur instantaneously, the caveman doesn't have time to think carefully about the situation. A reflex reaction is immediately set into motion. The brain signals the adrenal gland to release the hormone adrenaline into the blood stream. This chemical causes very rapid changes to take place in the caveman's body. These changes are exactly the same as those experienced during a panic attack:

- Our heart is beating very hard to pump more blood to the muscles in our arms and legs for running and fighting.
- Our breathing rate increases to take in more oxygen for the blood and muscles
- We often sweat profusely so as to cool the body down
- We can feel faint, dizzy and sick because blood from the head and chest is being pumped to the arms and legs for fighting and running.
- We sometimes feel the need to rush to the toilet.

All of these bodily changes are shown in the following diagram. They happen very suddenly and the experience can be very frightening if we have no understanding of what is going on.

SAMPLE

Coping with Anxiety and Stress V1.03 May 2009

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Reviewed Jul 2016 - Next review Jul 2018

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