

■ Anxiety and your body

When we feel anxious a chain of automatic events occurs in our bodies, which prepares us for action. This reaction is often termed the ‘fight or flight’ response and can be traced back into our evolutionary past. Imagine the primitive caveman threatened by a wild animal. He needs to be prepared for vigorous action: either to run or to fight. We still possess this survival reaction, although it is now triggered by more subtle situations – some of which we are not even consciously aware of.

The reaction itself consists of the brain sending a message to pump adrenalin into the bloodstream and into the large skeletal muscles of the arms and legs. The heart beats faster as it is working harder. Because it is working harder, it needs more fuel so we breathe in more oxygen. To cool down the body, sweat and blood capillaries come to the surface. The body ideally needs to be as light as possible so a visit to the toilet might be necessary. When this chain of events occurs in a normal situation, for example if we are pushing a trolley around a supermarket or sitting in a business meeting, it can be very frightening. The important thing to remember is that the physical symptoms are natural and not harmful, but are appearing in an inappropriate situation.

■ The three systems of anxiety

Anxiety is often referred to as if it is a single phenomenon, but this is not the case. There are three parts to the feeling of anxiety:

- ➊ **Bodily sensations:** These have already been mentioned – they include irregular breathing, churning stomach, sweating, trembling, racing heart and the need to visit the toilet.
- ➋ **Behaviour:** This means the way you behave – that is what you do when faced with the situation you fear. Especially important is the behaviour of avoiding the situation, either not going into the situation, or getting out of it as quickly as possible.

- ➌ **Thinking:** This includes your ideas and beliefs, your mental comments to yourself, or your mental pictures about what might happen to you in the situation you fear.

Looking at these parts separately, and learning new skills in each area, is an important part of anxiety management.

■ Anxiety and confidence

Anxiety reduces confidence because it makes it hard to do the things that were once easy. We normally feel confident when we do things well and lose confidence when we fail or avoid situations. It is easy to get into a vicious circle when, because we feel less confidence we avoid a situation, and because we avoid, we feel less confident. Confidence can be regained by learning how to cope better and gradually building up to take on bigger tasks.