



## Understanding the Nature of Anxiety

By

**Randy Brazzel MA, LPC, LMFT**

Anxiety is a normal part of the human experience. For example, a person may experience anxiety before giving a speech, taking a test, or walking down the aisle before getting married. For most people, these moments of anxiety fade quickly. Some people, however, experience anxiety that is so severe or long lasting that it begins to affect their ability to function.

### Understanding the Fight or Flight Reaction

Fear and anxiety are similar in that they both activate the natural survival mechanisms of the body. When someone is in danger, their body reacts automatically to the threat. Their senses become heightened and their muscles constrict so that they can either fight against the danger or run away from it. This "fight or flight" reaction is a powerful coping mechanism that can help us survive "life and death" dangers. Unfortunately, this same "fight or flight" reaction can create problems when anxiety is involved.

### How Anxiety and Fear Differ

One way to describe anxiety is that it is fear of something in the future based on something in the past. While fear helps us survive dangerous moments, anxiety is more about anticipating danger in the future. As a result, when someone is anxious they tend to feel fear in the moment while worrying about problems in the future. These worries often tend to result from past life experiences. Anxiety, therefore, tends to result in an escalating cycle of fear and worry. If left unbroken, this cycle of fear and worry can become overwhelming and disruptive to normal functioning.

### What Causes of Anxiety?

The cause of this anxiety can come from a variety of sources. Some of the most common causes include:

- Genetics
- Physical health issues
- Physical imbalances in the body
- Situational stress
- Unresolved trauma
- Ongoing stress
- Unresolved conflicts
- Unresolved family of origin issues
- Unresolved grief
- Worrying
- Substance abuse

### Disorders Associated with Anxiety

When anxiety becomes severe or ongoing, it can create a number of problems for an individual. For example, severe anxiety has been associated with a variety of physical health issues, including heart disease, gastrointestinal issues, respiratory problems, and other chronic illnesses. In addition, anxiety can manifest in a number of mental health disorders. Some of the more common disorders are listed below:

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder - Characterized by excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events or activities.
- Panic Disorder - Characterized by recurrent episodes of panic and intense fear.
- Separation Anxiety Disorder - Characterized by excessive fear about being separated

from home or a specific person.

- Phobias - Characterized by fear of a particular situation or object.
- Social Anxiety - Characterized by intense fear of social situations.
- Agoraphobia - Characterized by intense fear of a wide range of situations (i.e. fear of leaving the house.)
- Other Mental Health Problems - Anxiety also tends to be a significant factor in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Eating Disorders, PTSD, and Depression.

### Common Symptoms of Anxiety

Some of the common symptoms of anxiety are:

- Restlessness
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Accelerated heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pains
- Fear of dying or losing control
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Uncontrollable worry
- Fatigue or muscle tension
- Sleep disturbance



### New Dimensions Can Help If You or Someone You Know Is:

- Depressed or Suicidal
- Stuck and having difficulty making changes
- Dealing with trauma
- Struggling with Panic Attacks
- Having difficulty working or going to school
- Struggling with addictions or substance abuse
- Cutting or doing other self-destructive behaviors
- Struggling with anger issues
- Struggling to get medications stabilized

**1-800-685-9796**

[www.nddtreatment.com](http://www.nddtreatment.com)

### Understanding Panic Attacks

A panic attack is an episode of extreme fear that can feel debilitating and life threatening. When someone experiences a panic attack they often feel as though they are going to die. This feeling typically peaks within a few minutes, but can last for much longer for some people.

Once someone has experienced a panic attack, they often become terrified of having another one. Ironically, this fear of having a panic attack often creates the conditions that make another panic attack more likely. As a result, learning to manage the anxiety, fear, and worries is an important step in decreasing the occurrence of panic attacks in the future.



**New Dimensions**  
DAY TREATMENT CENTERS  
*help when you need it most*

**Clear Lake Location:**

1345 Space Park Dr., Ste. C  
Houston, TX 77058

**The Woodlands Location:**

25511 Budde Rd., Ste. 2401  
The Woodlands, TX 77380

**Katy Location:**

607 Park Grove Dr., Ste. A  
Katy, TX 77450

**1-800-685-9796**

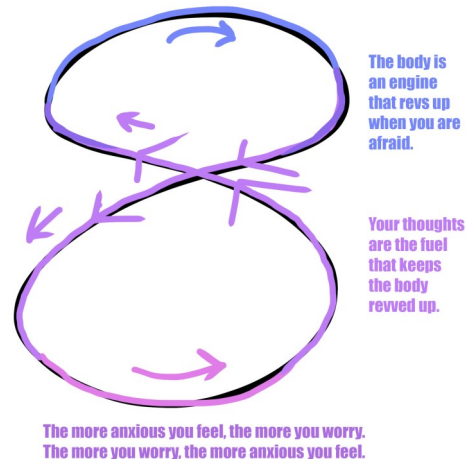
**www.nddtreatment.com**

**Psychiatric and Substance Abuse  
Treatment for Adolescents and  
Adults**

## Understanding the Anxiety Loop

When a person becomes anxious their body revs up to deal with the feeling of fear while their mind begins to search for signs of the danger. If a person was in real danger, this heightened state of alertness would serve them well as they dealt with the causes of the danger. However, because anxiety is focused on the future, not the present, the body has no place to discharge the energy. As a result, when a person becomes anxious, they begin to worry. As they worry, they become more anxious, which makes them worry more. This results in a self-feeding cycle of fear and worry, which I call the Anxiety Loop.

### The Picture Below Illustrates the Anxiety Loop



## How to Break the Anxiety Loop

To break the Anxiety Loop, you have to learn how to relax the body and stop the worries at the same time. While this may sound easy, it can be very difficult to do. When you are anxious, it feels like you “have to worry” because if you don’t “something bad will happen.” For example, a person who is afraid of flying may become hyper-vigilant before boarding a plane in order to spot signs of danger. Unfortunately, this hyper-vigilance often just leads to a panic attack instead of reassurance.

Remember that anxiety is fear of something in the future, based on something in the past. As a result, there is nothing that you can do about the issue you are worrying about, except worry more. However, instead of solving the problem, the worry just makes you feel more anxious. So the question becomes, how do you break the cycle of

fear and worry, when you feel compelled to keep worrying?

### Get Back in the Moment

Because anxiety is focused on the past and the future, a great first step to decreasing anxiety is to get back “in the moment”. The more you are in the here and now, the less anxious you will be. One strategy to get back in the moment is to engage the senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. When you are focused completely on what you are experiencing, it forces the mind to be more in the present.

### Engage Your Mind and Body

It is easier to break the Anxiety Loop if your mind and body are engaged in an activity. For example, it is hard to worry about your job while you are playing a strenuous game of tennis. The more the activity requires your full attention, the

more it helps you break the cycle of anxiety and worry.

### Use the Stop and Start Technique

If I tell you to stop thinking about money problems, you are actually more likely to think about money problems. Instead, when you are trying to stop the worries, focus on thinking about things that are not anxiety provoking. For example, instead of worrying about something that is out of your control, focus your attention on things that you can control or engage in.

### Ask Yourself: “Is This a Life or Death Issue?”

If the thing you are worried about is not a “life or death” issue, then it is more likely to be a quality of life issue. Focus on making decisions that improve the quality of your life and you will feel less anxious as a result.

### Learn Deep Breathing Exercises

Deep breathing allows the body to get more oxygen which makes it easier for the body to relax. Taking 3 slow deep breaths from the diaphragm can be very helpful in getting both the mind and body to slow down.

### Break the Cycle of the Anxiety Loop Early and Often

If you allow anxiety to build up, it becomes difficult to break the cycle of fear and worry. The earlier you stop the worries and the quicker you relax the body, the more control you tend to have over the feelings. Intervene early and intervene often in order to keep the Anxiety Loop from becoming a self-feeding cycle of fear and worry.