

**Clinical Health Psychology  
Women's Health  
133 St John's Way  
London N19 3RQ  
Phone: 020 7527 1538  
Cim-tr.WhittingtonCHP@nhs.net**

**Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)**

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or [whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net)

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please contact us on 020 7288 3182. We will try our best to meet your needs.

Twitter.com/WhitHealth  
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Whittington Health NHS Trust  
Magdala Avenue  
London  
N19 5NF  
Phone: 020 7272 3070  
[www.whittington.nhs.uk](http://www.whittington.nhs.uk)

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## ANTENATAL ANXIETY



This booklet is designed to help  
you better understand anxiety  
and ways to manage it



This booklet is designed to accompany the discussions you have been having with your therapist. It has been designed by the Women's Health Psychology team at Whittington Hospital. It was adapted with support from the following resources:

- ▶ **The Compassionate Mind website and book by Paul Gilbert**
- ▶ **MIND mental health charity resources, including 'Two in Mind'**

There are four sections to this hand out which follow on from each other:

- ◆ **PART I: WHAT IS ANXIETY**
- ◆ **PART II: WHAT HAPPENS DURING PREGNANCY**
- ◆ **PART III: HOW TO MANAGE ANXIETY**
- ◆ **PART IV: FURTHER RESOURCES**

[www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org)  
[www.bestbeginnings.org.uk](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk)  
[www.breakthesilence-pni.org](http://www.breakthesilence-pni.org)  
[www.solihullapproachparenting.com](http://www.solihullapproachparenting.com)  
[www.maternalocd.org](http://www.maternalocd.org)  
[www.nct.org.uk](http://www.nct.org.uk)  
[www.pandasfoundation.org.uk](http://www.pandasfoundation.org.uk)  
[www.marcesociety.com](http://www.marcesociety.com)  
[www.tommys.org](http://www.tommys.org)  
[www.foundationyears.org.uk](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk)  
[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)  
[www.your-baby.org.uk](http://www.your-baby.org.uk)  
[www.beginbeforebirth.org](http://www.beginbeforebirth.org)

**Factsheets, leaflets and guidance:**

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/postnatal-depression/#.U3ycVCgq8TI](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/postnatal-depression/#.U3ycVCgq8TI)  
[www.tommys.org/file/Wellbeingplan.pdf](http://www.tommys.org/file/Wellbeingplan.pdf)  
[www.solihullapproachparenting.com/informationfor-parents](http://www.solihullapproachparenting.com/informationfor-parents)  
[www.rcm.org.uk/college/your-career/information-services/resources/](http://www.rcm.org.uk/college/your-career/information-services/resources/)  
[www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/11004/30433/30433.pdf](http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/11004/30433/30433.pdf)  
<http://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org.uk/>

**Telephone Helplines:**

Breathing Space – mental health helpline (Mon – Thurs: 6pm-2am, Fri – Mon: 6pm-6am) Tel: 0800 83 85 87

## PART IV: FURTHER RESOURCES

### Online support:

Complete an 'Enjoy your Baby' cognitive behavioural therapy online course at [www.twainmind.org](http://www.twainmind.org)

[www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)

This site is designed to help you think about emotional problems and work towards solving them

[www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

This site can help you to identify problem emotions and develop better coping skills.

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

An online cognitive behavioural therapy programme for people with anxiety or depression and includes: Understanding why we feel as we do / Practical problem solving skills / Using Anxiety Control Training relaxation / Overcoming Reduced activity / Helpful and Unhelpful behaviours / Using Medication effectively / Noticing unhelpful thoughts / Changing unhelpful thoughts / Healthy living - sleep, food, diet and exercise / Staying well.

Mindfulness (free online course at [www.bemindful.co.uk](http://www.bemindful.co.uk)).

[www.twainmind.org](http://www.twainmind.org)

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

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

[www.app-network.org](http://www.app-network.org)

### Anxiety during Pregnancy

Anxiety during pregnancy or Antenatal Anxiety is just as common as Antenatal and Postnatal Depression, but far less well known.

It is perfectly normal to feel some anxiety during pregnancy. The tricky problem is that a lot of people can talk about pregnancy as a time of joy where expecting mothers feel "blooming" and any worries are "just your hormones". This type of response from others, although delivered with good intention, can make it very difficult for expecting mothers to open up and talk about just how anxious or stressed they feel.

#### **You are not alone!**

Whether you have had children before or not, pregnancy is a time of change and adjustment for you and your family. There are many normal worries around at this time. And it is relatively common for these worries to increase to a point that it feels hard to see a way out. The charity MIND found that up to 4 in 10 new mums reported significant stress, anxiety and depression during and after pregnancy.

They also found that a fifth of women reported a lack of support. Yet nearly half of women are too embarrassed to say anything with a third of women finding it too difficult to tell a mental health professional how they are feeling.

### **Don't suffer in silence!**

It is important that you recognise these feelings so that you get the right help and support for the wellbeing of yourself and your baby. And that is where we come in. This leaflet aims to give you information about anxiety during pregnancy, how to make sense of it and what you can do about it.

But a leaflet by itself is not enough to help tackle some of the complexities of anxiety. If you are struggling with antenatal anxiety to the point it is making it hard for you to do the things you need or want to do, it is really important to tell your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor about how you are feeling.

You do not need to feel ashamed or afraid, they are there to help.

### ***Don't forget to look after yourself***

Throughout all of this, remember to make sure you are looking out for your well-being when making these plans or distracting yourself from your worries. Often current problems become that way because there are distressing or painful to resolve. So try not to be too hard on yourself. Find ways to factor in taking care of yourself. If you are the kind of person who is used to looking after others or giving your all in other areas of your life, it may feel unnatural or even selfish to put yourself first. But remember, you and your baby are the priority. It is ok, and important to, make time for yourself to put your feet up and do whatever it is that you find relaxing.

- ◆ Keep active and get out the house
- ◆ Rest when your body tells you that you need to
- ◆ Eat regularly and have a healthy well balanced diet
- ◆ Prioritise getting a good night's sleep – try using the soothing exercises above if you have difficulties sleeping
- ◆ Keep talking and connected to those around you.
- ◆ Most importantly, take time to treat yourself and do the things you enjoy.

Try not to judge yourself or any changes in your body too harshly. If you struggle to be compassionate to yourself, ask yourself what you would say to others or what might those who care about say to you.

## THE ANTENATAL WORRY TREE

**Notice the worrying**



**“What am I worrying about?”**

“Is this worry about a current problem?”

Or “Is it a worry about a hypothetical situation?”  
(E.g. something that might happen or that is out of your hands)



**Can I do something about it?**

**No**

**Change the focus of your attention**

*Try to consume your mind with something else as it does not need space for the worry right now*

**Yes**

**Make an Action Plan:**

What? When? How?  
Now? → Do it!  
Later? → Schedule it!



**Change the focus of your attention**

*Try to consume your mind with something else as it does not need space for the worry right now*

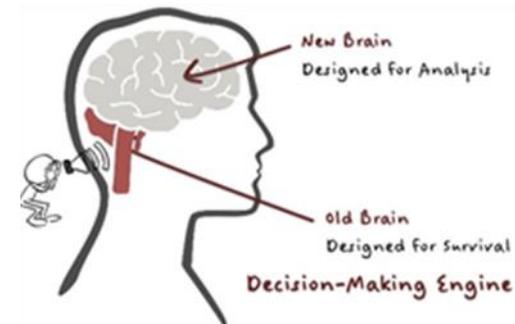
## PART I: WHAT IS ANXIETY

Anxiety is a normal healthy reaction. It happens to everyone in times of danger or in worrying situations. It is part of our body's basic threat response to dangerous situations. To help make sense of this, it is useful to consider how we and our brains have evolved.

### The History of Anxiety

To put it very (very!) simply our brains have two parts:

- 1) Our old brain which we share with other species
- 2) Our new more complex brain which separates us from other species, allowing us to think and imagine



Although we have evolved to do great and complex things with the newer parts of our brain, we still have old ways of responding within us.

The old brain is designed to ensure that our very basic needs are met. These are the same needs we share with animals, including food, shelter, reproduction, and most importantly *safety*. It contains a basic threat response which is triggered when our brain perceives danger in the environment. So when we feel under threat (or anxious) a chain of automatic responses happen in our bodies.

Our body's natural alarm system:

It does this using a part of the brain called the amygdala. It is a bit like our body's guard dog. Its job is to keep us safe by setting of an alarm in our body alerting us to danger. To explain this, let's think about how this is used in the animal kingdom. Imagine a wild zebra quietly eating some grass when... →



If you have not felt able to already, find a way that helps it feel safer to talk to your friends or family about how you have been feeling. Use the support of your midwife or any other professionals you may have involved in your care. They might be able to help you come up with a pregnancy or birth wellbeing plan to help you to feel more prepared about giving birth. There are also lots of groups around for new or expecting mums. Or it might be that discovering a new activity feels more helpful for you at this time.

- **How:** How exactly will you go about doing this? How exactly will you go about telling someone something, or doing something that you have been avoiding? For example, if talking is difficult, writing it down might help, or starting a new activity might be easier if you plan out the steps of where you need to go and when and maybe taking someone with you.
- **When:** When will I be able to do this? If it is something you can do now, *do it*. If there is nothing you can do right now, but can do later make a plan of when and how you will. Maybe even write this down or add it to your diary. Then once this action is done or planned, put it to one side and use the ways above to distract yourself and soothe any left-over worry or uncomfortable feelings.

**Pause – Take a step back – Make a plan – Refocus**

## Coping with current problems

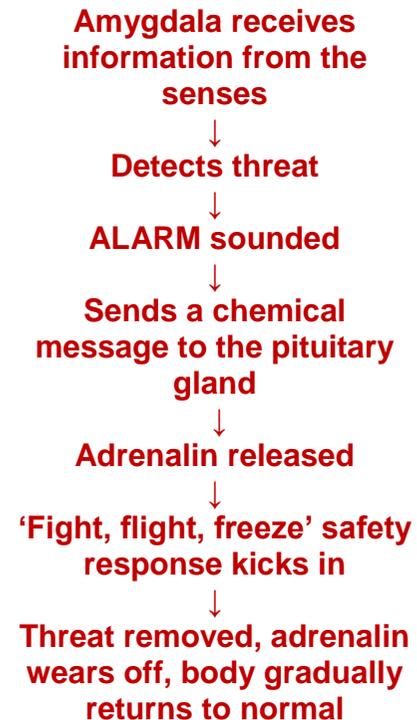
If you have identified a current problem that you can do something about, it is helpful to make an action plan to focus your behaviour in a helpful way. Ask yourself:

- **What:** What can you do to help this situation? What can you ask others to do to help this situation? Sometimes this might be a task that needs to be done, but for very understandable reasons it has been avoided. Or perhaps a difficulty you are having with someone else and there is something you want to say? Or a physical change that it is important to find out about.

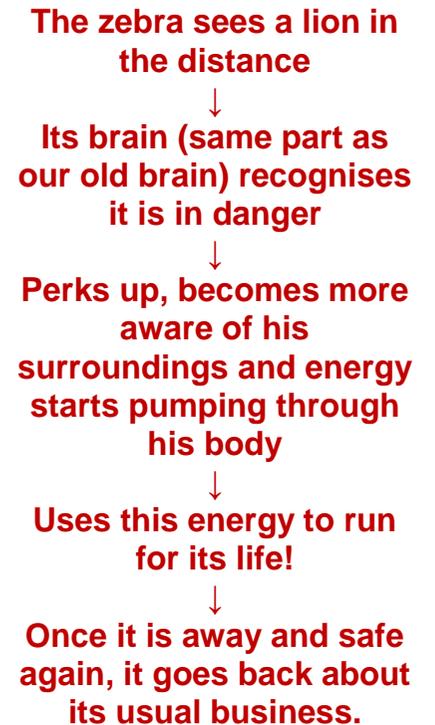
As we have spoken about throughout, there can be a lot of demands and expectations during pregnancy. It is ok and probably expected by those around you to ask for and accept help. This might be asking for more help with tasks you have to do or household chores. Or it might be finding someone you feel safe to have a good proper catch up with about how you have been feeling.

Around a half of women in the MIND survey said that the main cause of their feelings was isolation and keeping things to themselves.

**What is going on in the old brain:**



**What happens for the zebra:**



So as you can see this alarm helps the body to speed up and get ready for action. This action might be fighting or attempting to overcome the threat; fleeing or escaping the threat; or freezing and 'playing dead' to try to fool the threat into not attacking. These changes in the body, and the felt sense that comes with them, are what leads to the experience of anxiety. As these responses have been very beneficial in keeping our ancestors safe from danger they have stayed with us as we have evolved.

## **Anxiety in Modern Times - our tricky brain**

Alongside this old, evolutionary way of responding, we have developed an amazing and complex new brain. This has brought us the ability to think, reason, use imagination, have a sense of who we and what our desires or values are. This has great benefits, with the creation of culture, science, technology etc.. However unfortunately this has brought with it some problems for us when it comes to our emotions.

### ***How the alarm system works in us***

To understand this, let's think back to our zebra. The alarm system was incredibly helpful in getting him away from the danger. The zebra was able to put all the adrenaline and energy that pumped through its body to good use, because what it needed to do was get away as fast as possible.

Now let's think of us. Imagine that suddenly out of the corner of your eye, you notice a lion creeping into the room you are in. Luckily our alarm will (hopefully!) still kick in to action. And most likely, like our zebra, we will go for the 'get out of here as soon as possible' option. So say we manage to get away to safety again, what then?

**Remember, our minds are very busy places**, especially when we are worried. No matter how engrossing what we are doing is, when we are feeling worried our mind might wander. That is ok, just keep bringing your attention back to whatever it is you are doing.

**Remind yourself that these feelings won't last forever.** In the MIND survey we mentioned earlier, nearly half of women reported that time was the most helpful for recovery. Our body's alarm system won't keep firing forever. If we are able to find things around us that remind us we are safe, our body and our mind will calm down.



**Try to find something which engrosses your attention** – this could be anything you like, whether it be reading, cooking, playing a game, music, yoga, colouring, going for a walk, watching something... Other people can also be a very useful distraction. It does not matter what it is, it just has to feel like it fits to you in that moment.

**Try not to pick something which is closely related to your worries.** For example, if you are worried about giving birth, reading about this is likely to bring our attention back to the thoughts. Find something that takes your mind away to somewhere else.

**Using our senses can help.** Finding activities that activate our senses can be really helpful in distracting our mind. This might be using strong smells which grab our attention. This could be relaxing smells, like candles or lavender scents which you can buy in most pharmacies, or sharp smells, like a citrus smell from peeling an orange.

Touch is also a really helpful way of both distracting and soothing our minds. As humans we are biologically designed to seek physical comfort when distressed. Comforting physical touch is therefore a key regulator to our emotions. It can stimulate the release of opiates and oxytocin in our bodies which activates our body's natural self-soothing system, which is associated with being cared for and feeling safe.

What about when you next see someone? Do you tell them? Or when you are by yourself, do you think back to it? What about next time you are back in the same place or situation? Do you worry it will happen again?

Remember, our zebra has used up its energy, its body has calmed and it is busy searching for food again. But the difference with us is our wonderful new brain... Unfortunately it can leave us overthinking about what has *already happened* in the past and can dream up all sorts of possibilities that *may* happen to us in the future.

One of the tricky problems with the amygdala is that it is not very good at telling the difference between real dangers out there in the world and dangers we think about or imagine. This can lead to lots of false alarms where it responds to these internal threats with the same mechanism as it uses to respond to external dangers, such as a lion.

So whilst the zebra is happily along its way, we can find ourselves in a tricky situation where we keep triggering our alarm system purely by thinking about what has happened. And the more we think, the more anxious we become.

Now obviously being attacked by a lion is a pretty extreme example. But if our thoughts can be enough to trigger this alarm within us, then you can start to see how all sorts of situations can become threatening and anxiety provoking. An upcoming exam "I am going to fail". Going out "Last time I went to a party I embarrassed myself". Being pregnant "I don't know what I am doing", "what if I harm my baby"...

### ***How the old and new brain interact:***

Remember, the amygdala and its alarm system is designed for a world with a lot of real external dangers, such as predators. Therefore it is very ready to see things as threatening and works on a “rather be safe than sorry” basis. However as humans and society have evolved, although we can still come across physical threats, the sorts of threats or dangers we most commonly face now are more likely to come from inside us. So we can see definite benefit from this system when someone or something is trying to physically harm us. But it is not so great when it goes in all guns blazing to a threatening *memory* or even a memory of when you *thought* something *might* be threatening.

Luckily our clever new brain has ways of checking out the threat to see if it is actually harmful to us. This is done by a part of the brain called the **hippocampus**. Its job is to check to see if the information which the amygdala used to set off the alarm is *actually* threatening or dangerous.



It does this by gathering information from our existing knowledge and memories. You can think of it a bit like a librarian shuffling through a big, complicated library. Unfortunately as it sounds, this process can be very slow. To add to this, when the alarm system is active the hippocampus does not work as well - imagine trying to work your way around a maze with someone shouting in your ear!

### ***Coping with our thoughts***

Usually when the worry is coming from inside us, like a thought or an image of something that might happen, it can be hard to find helpful ways to respond with our behaviour. That is because often many of the unusual or sometimes disturbing and concerning thoughts that pop in to our heads are very unhelpful and just not true. But as we learnt earlier, the more we pay attention to these thoughts (e.g. the more we think about them, question them, try to answer them, try to find solutions for them...) the bigger they grow, ending up in a vicious and upsetting cycle.

Instead, **concentrating on what is actually happening (in the here and now), rather than what you think might happen, will help you to feel less worried.** This might be bringing your attention back to the moment either by taking in your surroundings, reminding yourself or what is happening right now (which bits do you definitely know and which bits are hypothetical/guesses/worries) or using the exercises above to refocus your attention on your breathing or your body in a more soothing way.

Sometimes people find it quite hard to refocus their attention, especially when our alarm bell is going off quite loudly and our thoughts are difficult to ignore. In these situations it can be helpful to have something more concrete to distract ourselves.

## Do what you can and let go of what you can't

Now that we have slowed everything down a little bit, it is easier to make use of our wonderful new brain and think a bit more clearly about what is happening to us when we feel anxious and *what we want to do*.

### **Decision tree**

When you have noticed the worry start to creep in, stop and pause for a moment and try to ask yourself "What am I worrying about?" "What is it that has set off my alarm bell?" Is it something or someone out there or is it something inside of you, like a thought, memory or unusual sensation.

The most important thing to then ask yourself is - is this worry happening because of something I can actually do something about? So is it a current problem that I can resolve by doing something?

Or is it a hypothetical situation (e.g. something that might maybe happen in the future) or something currently out of my control (e.g. something that has already happened)? What would be helpful to do next might depend on this question.

Similar experiences and memories are stored together and these are the easiest things to find first. So while the librarian slowly gather's information, the sorts of memories in the fore front of the mind are all those associated with whatever it is that set the alarm off in the first place. So if it is something that scares, upsets or angers us, we will more easily think of things or times that have scared, upset or angered us.

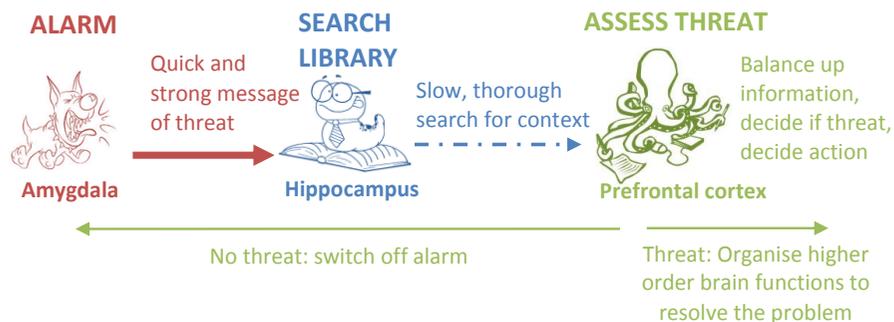
Once the hippocampus/librarian has managed to gather the necessary information, it sends everything to a higher part of our brain called the **prefrontal cortex**. Its job is to oversee this process and put all of the pieces of the puzzle together.



It then has the power to decide what to do. It can decide to listen to the alarm, assess the situation to be threatening and direct our attention and thinking to resolve the threat. Or assess there is no threat, turn off the alarm and stop the body's response. So it is a bit like the brain's very sensible manager trying to make sure it acts on accurate, complete information.

So, what does this mean for us when we get anxious?

What we know so far:



So we have a very helpful but quick to act alarm system, which is now operating in a sometimes unhelpful mind that can easily see thoughts, urges or sensations as threatening. Although we can use the helpful aspects of our new brain to find ways to deal with this, these are slow to kick in to action.

In the meantime, we are left with unpleasant thoughts feelings, urges and a load of different behaviours that we are driven to do in an attempt to resolve the threat:

Next focus on your body and imagine the tension in your body from your shoulders down to your stomach and again, as you breathe out just imagine the tension leaving down through your legs, down through the floor and away. If it helps, gently tense your stomach and back muscles as you breathe in and then relax them as you breathe out.

Now focus on the tips of your fingers, through your wrists, your arms and elbows and shoulders. Imagine that the tension that was there can be released - let go of. Gently let the tension run off down through your body, down through your legs, out through the floor and away.

Now imagine the tension that sits in your head, neck and forehead. The tension has been your alert system in action and it would like to be released now - to take a rest. As you breathe out, just imagine it running down through your body, through your legs and out through the floor...

Now we can focus on your whole body. Each time you breathe out, focus on the word relax and how it feels to let the tension flow through and out of you. Imagine your body becoming more relaxed. You can go back and repeat any areas that still feel tense or uncomfortable.

You can end this exercise by taking a deeper breath, moving the body around a little and noting how it feels and how grateful it is to you for spending time to try to let go of the tension.

Remember that it is perfectly ok for your mind to wander. Simply notice it happening with curiosity about where your mind has gone. Then gently guide your attention back to your breathing as best as you can.

When you feel ready, slowly open your eyes and bring yourself back to the present moment. Sometimes it helps to have a gentle stretch or deep breath to prepare you to carry on with your day.

### Simple Body Scan

Now try once again to focus on your breathing until you find the rhythm that is most comfortable and soothing for you. If this is hard, do not worry; just breathe as comfortably as you are able to.

Now slowly bring your focus to your legs. Notice how they feel for a moment. Now imagine that all the tension in your legs is flowing down through your legs and down into the floor and away. Let it go on its way.

As you breathe in, just notice any tension and then, as you breathe out, imagine the tension flowing down through your legs and out through the floor. Imagine your legs feeling grateful that they can let go. If you find this hard to imagine, slightly tense your leg muscles as you breathe in, and then gently relax them as you breathe out. Noticing the change in sensation from tensed to relaxed.

- **Thoughts:** A mind that has all the anxiety provoking thoughts and memories at its forefront and is alert, ready to look out for danger. Sometimes this can lead some people to experience disturbing or intrusive thoughts. For example, they may think something terrible is going to happen, that they will lose control, or that they will somehow embarrass themselves in front of other people.

Many people are unaware that they are having these thoughts until they begin to look out for them. These thoughts tend to be very negative and make you feel more anxious or frightened.

- **Feelings:** A body with lots of adrenaline and energy pumping through it but no real way of using this. This leads to the feeling of anxiety and the uncomfortable physical symptoms that come with it (on the next page).

- **Behaviours:** A drive to act without an actual object out there to overcome.

- Our flight response becomes avoiding people, places, things, tasks etc. Even trying to avoid our own thoughts by thinking about anything else, which sometimes can lead to more unhelpful thoughts. Avoiding is one of the most common ways we try to cope with anxiety. It seems like a good solution in the short term, but in the long term can make whatever it is that's threatening (a thought, a feared outcome, a place or event) seem more frightening and harder to face.

- Our fight response becomes anger/aggression. This might get directed towards ourselves or others. Again, although this can give a quick release of all that uncomfortable built up tension, in the long term it can cause all sort of problems for us and our relationships. And can often lead to more emotions, like guilt or sadness.
- Our freeze response becomes us perhaps still doing things but mentally disengaging and distancing ourselves from what we are engaged in. This can be another type of avoiding coming into contact with things we fear or trying to avoid making things worse.

All of these things make complete sense as to why we would do them to protect ourselves from how painful and distressing anxiety can be. But as we have begun to see they might help give us some short term relief but they can make us feel worse in the long term.

### **The physical effects of anxiety**

Below are common symptoms of anxiety. You might recognise some of them but not others. Everyone has their own individual response. It also outlines the reasons why these symptoms occur as a result of our body's alarm system

### **Soothing Rhythm Breathing**

Find a way to sit that feels comfortable, place both feet flat on the floor about shoulder's width apart, rest your hands on your legs. Close your eyes or look down at the floor. Allow yourself to have a gentle facial expression, maybe a slight smile.

Now just gently focus on your breathing. Breathe in through your nose. As you breathe try to notice and allow the air to come down into your diaphragm - that's just at the bottom of your ribcage in the upside down 'V'. Place your hand on this area and notice how your hand lifts and falls with your breath. Feel your diaphragm (the area below your ribs) gently move as you breath in... and out... Do this for a few breathes until it feels more comfortable and seems natural and easy for you.

Now play an experiment with your breathing. Breathe a little faster or a little slower until you find a breathing pattern that, for you, seems to be your own soothing, comforting rhythm. You may usually find it is slightly slower and deeper than normal. But the most important thing is to practise finding your own your soothing rhythm breathing, not impose one - you do not need to worry about whether you are doing it 'correctly'

Now we can spend a little while – for as long as you wish - just focusing on our breathing, just noticing the breath coming through your nose, down into the diaphragm, your diaphragm lifting and then falling with the air moving out, back through your nose. Notice the sensations in your nose, then through to your body as you gently breathe in... and out...

When you practise these you are likely to start noticing how busy your mind is. Particularly, if you are practising this when your alarm bell is ringing, setting off all sorts of thoughts, memories, images, sensations, urges related to what is making you feel worried. This is ok. It is you noticing how our minds work. You do not need to try to change or stop this, these experiences will naturally move through your mind as you keep bringing your attention back to the exercise. The more you keep bringing your attention back to the exercise, the less time your mind will have to pay attention to all the troublesome, or even mundane, busyness that it is usually preoccupied with.

Each time this happens all you have to do is simply notice them, maybe remember that it is just your old mind trying to alert you to something, no need to judge or try to change it, and just return your attention back to what you were doing:

### Notice and Return

The more you can practise these exercises the easier they will be to use when you find yourself in anxiety provoking situations or when you start to notice yourself becoming anxious.

Headache, dizziness

= Adrenaline released

Aching, tense or agitated feeling, difficulty relaxing, shakiness

= Large muscles, such as neck, shoulders, legs, contract ready for action

Excess sweating, blushing, feel hot, feeling faint

= With all this increased activity, our bodies' heat up so the body cools itself: blood vessels and capillaries move closer to skin surface

Trouble catching breath

= Breathing becomes faster and shallower to get more oxygen to the muscles

Blurred vision

= Pupils dilate to see clearer

Chest pains, tingling, pounding heart

= Heart pumps faster and blood pressure rises to pump more oxygen and adrenaline around the body

Feeling of needing the toilet or going to the toilet more often

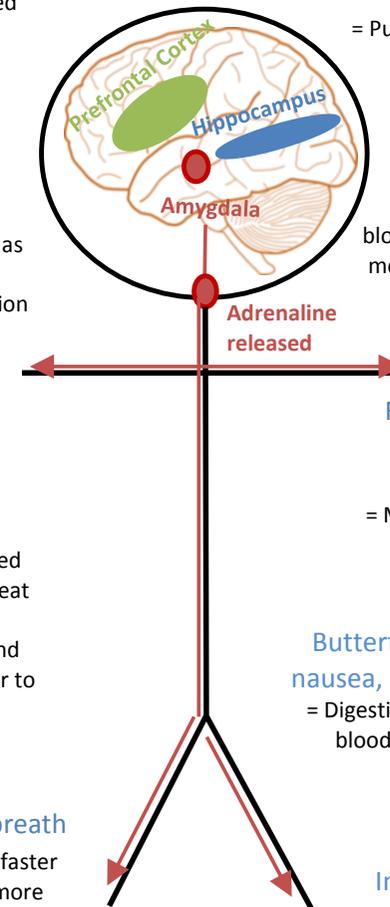
= Muscles in bladder relax to prioritise other muscles

Butterflies in tummy feeling, nausea, indigestion, diarrhoea

= Digestion slows down or stops as blood is diverted away from the stomach to the muscles

Indigestion

= Liver releases stored sugar for quick energy



### Why do I keep getting more and more anxious?

So we have seen that the way we think about something that is happening to us, has happened to us or might happen to us causes changes in our body and our mood. These changes then drive us to do something to protect ourselves and reduce these horrible sensations.

#### How we think affects how we feel and what we do.

However, sometimes the ways in which we respond to our anxiety can help us feel a bit better in the moment but we can find ourselves feeling more and more anxious in the long run. This is because some behaviours can stop us from finding out that **we can cope** with the threat and that the experience **will reduce**. Our amygdala alarm bell doesn't keep shouting and releasing adrenaline forever. When our higher brain kicks in, we will start to feel more able to cope.

Instead of learning we can cope we can start to learn "maybe I was right to avoid it", "maybe it was only ok because I made sure I read lots about it first". Then whatever it is that was threatening, stays threatening or gets even more threatening. The amygdala learns it should fire when these things happen or we have these thoughts and we learn that we must do certain things to be ok.

So when we start to notice anxiety provoking or distressing thoughts creep in to our minds or anxious sensations in our body, we can recognise this as our amygdala alarm bell at work. We can now understand why it is doing this. Remember it is designed to try to look after you but as its better safe than sorry it often gets this a bit wrong. We can even try to thank our tricky mind for trying to be helpful by bringing things to our attention. Sometimes this information can be very useful to us. Even if it is just helping us to know something is not quite right and maybe we need to give ourselves a break and focus on looking after ourselves for a bit. Once we have noticed this process in action, we can then start to gain back some control over how we choose to react.

As we have learnt from the poor librarian hippocampus, trying to think and make decisions when an alarm bell is going off can be very difficult. So it is very helpful to first try to soothe and quieten down our amygdala by letting it know it is ok and that it does not need to fire.

#### How to soothe our amygdala

We learnt earlier that when the amygdala fires, it sends a message to the body to speed up and get ready to act. To slow down or stop this process, we need to get the body to send a message back to the brain letting it know that it is calm and therefore that it is safe. There are a couple of exercises we can use to do this. They both work by helping us to soothe our distress and slow our anxious body down. These exercises are described on the following pages.

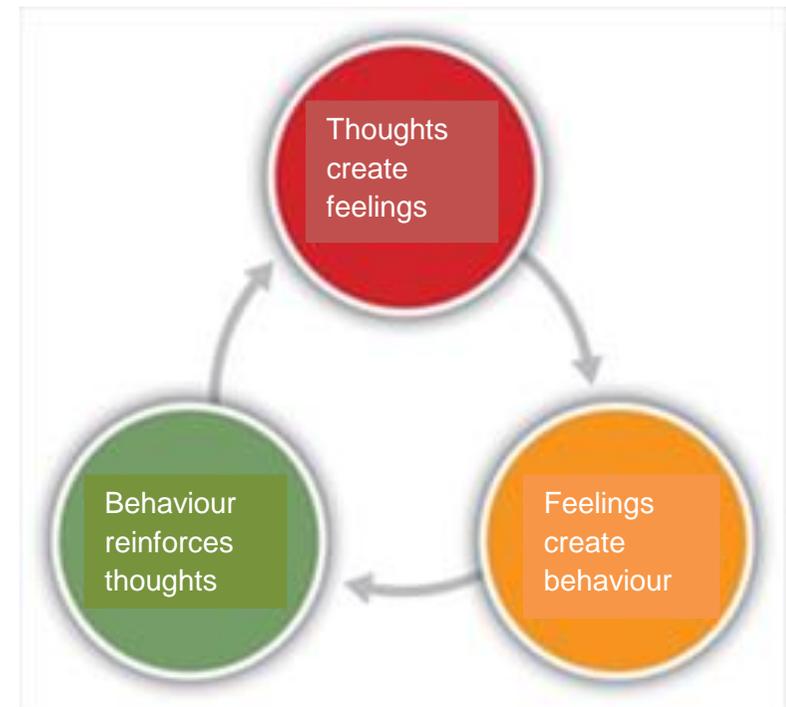
## Our minds are very busy places.

The more anxious we are, the busier they can become. As we have learnt our amygdala can at any time see any of these sensations, emotions, thoughts, and urges as threatening and kick start our threat response. This then brings with it a whole host of new sensations, emotions, thoughts and urges.

But that is ok. We can learn to recognise what particular thoughts, emotions, sensations or urges are more likely to set off our own personal alarm bell. Try to notice and begin to recognise all of these things are work. It might help you to **write it down in a diary** so you recognise which ones come up more often than others.

- A sensation is a physical feeling in the body, such as aching, tingling, or a fastness of breath.
- A thought is something that passes through the mind: a string of words, a mental image, or a memory.
- An urge is an impulse or desire to do something, such as scratch your nose.
- An emotion is a combination of sensations, thoughts, and urges. Emotions are complex, but they can be labelled with a single word, such as “anger,” “happiness,” or “sadness.”

Once we get to know how our own minds and bodies work we can make more sense of what is happening to us when we feel anxious. This can make the experience feel less distressing



## PART II: WHAT HAPPENS DURING PREGNANCY

Research has found that stress hormones dramatically rise during pregnancy. An example of a stress hormone is cortisol, which is one of the chemicals naturally produced in the body when stress triggers our 'fight or flight' response. These stress hormones begin to rise during the second trimester and peak during late pregnancy. In the last weeks before birth, cortisol levels have been found to be two to three times higher than normal – the same level found in people with major depression. So if you have noticed yourself feeling more stressed than you usually do, this makes a lot of biological sense!

### ***Will this stress harm my baby?***

Earlier studies which you may come across which indicate that stress is bad for the baby refer to prolonged, very severe stress. A more recent study has found that actually a moderate amount of stress **will not harm the baby at all and in fact might do it some good**. They found that children of mothers who reported more stress during pregnancy were more advanced at age two.

## PART III: HOW TO MANAGE ANXIETY

So we have learnt that it is an inbuilt part of human nature to become anxious. And that unfortunately, because of our tricky mind, all sorts of things can make us anxious. Also, during pregnancy everyone's stress levels rise, because a bit of this is important and helpful for the baby. None of these things are your fault. But luckily there are things you can do to help manage this anxiety.

### **Recognising our tricky mind at work**

Now that we have learnt about the trickiness of our mind, we can notice it in action.

Have a go at trying to sit quietly for two minutes, only paying attention to the sounds around you.

...

What happened? Were you able to just hear the sounds... no others distractions at all...

We all have constant streams of sensations, emotions, thoughts, and urges passing through our minds and bodies.

- ◆ These stress hormones also help prepare the mother's brain for becoming a mother. Higher levels of cortisol during pregnancy have been linked to more attentive and nurturing mothering and more positive maternal behaviour. It has also been found that this elevated cortisol may help mothers to more instinctively distinguish their babies from other infants.

This led the authors of the influential study finding positive effects of antenatal anxiety and stress to conclude that:

*"I'd like all pregnant women to heave a big sigh of relief - they hear all these awful stuff about everything they do. Now they can stop worrying about worrying. The reason to avoid stress is not because it's hurting the baby but because it is hurting you."*

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4987080.stm>

So antenatal anxiety and stress may not be detrimental to the baby, but as the authors pointed out is it a very unpleasant experience for you as a mother. The next section will look at ways to manage anxiety for the sake of you and your comfort and wellbeing.

It is thought that this extra surge in stress hormone during pregnancy might in fact come from the placenta. The fact that our bodies naturally produce such high levels of stress hormone when pregnant, strongly backs up this finding that it is needed and actual has benefit to the baby. The ways in which research has found stress hormones to be beneficial during pregnancy include:

- ◆ In the first days of pregnancy, these stress hormones suppress the mother's immune system, preventing the mother's body from attacking the foetus
- ◆ Later on these hormones also help regulate the flow between the placenta and the foetus
- ◆ Cortisol has generally got a bad rep as being termed the stress hormone, but actually every organ in the body needs cortisol to develop properly. This surge in cortisol and other hormones is thought to be really important in helping the foetus' organs, particularly its brain, develop and mature. This finding is so robust that the National Institute of health has recommended that women at risk of premature delivery are given a synthetic version of cortisol to help promote this development.

