

**Phobia Group**

**Session 2: The Body**

In today’s session we discussed the impact that phobias have on the body, its role in the ‘vicious circle’ as outlined below, and some of the things we can do to manage the physical symptoms of anxiety that phobias elicit.

**Fight or Flight Response**

When we sense danger or threat, we experience a strong emotion called fear which leads us to feel anxious. Fear and anxiety trigger a chain of automatic events in our bodies that prepare us for action. This is often called the ‘fight or flight’ response and can be traced back to our need for survival in the past. The ‘fight or flight’ response is a normal and helpful response when we are faced with immediate physical danger or threat. However, it is unhelpful when it is switched on if the threat is low or happens in a situation when there is no ‘real’ threat e.g. when you’re speaking in front of people or queuing up in the supermarket.

**Why does anxiety and panic happen?**

When there is a danger our bodies go through a series of changes called fight, flight or freeze response. It is a physiological response that helps us to deal with real danger.

If you heard a burglar breaking into your house in the middle of the night your fight, flight or freeze would get turned on. As a result your body would go through a series of physical changes. Importantly, the response also gets activated when we believe there is a danger, but in fact we are safe. This is why some people experience anxiety and/or panic even though nothing frightening or threatening has actually occurred.

* The most common physical symptoms of fight, flight or freeze response include heart palpitations, chest tightness, rapid breathing, sweating, hot flushing, dry mouth, numbness and pins & needles.

**Common Physical Sensations (see diagram)**

1. Your heart beats faster: To allow your heart to take blood where it is most needed i.e. legs to run faster. You are not having a heart attack – this is a normal response to anxiety.
2. Your breathing quickens and becomes shallow: Helps oxygen to be carried around your lungs, arms and legs via bloodstream. Side effects may be chest pain, breathlessness, choking feeling, blurred vision. Although you may feel dizzy you will not faint. To faint your blood pressure has to drop – when we are anxious, because our hearts beat faster, our blood pressure is temporarily raised.
3. Your muscles start to tense: This happens to make sure we can stand and fight or run away, ready for action.

Anxiety and panic attacks can be very stressful and uncomfortable but they **are not dangerous.** They will not cause you harm. This response is there **to protect you.**

**Exercise**

What changes do you notice in your body when you are feeling panicked & anxious?

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**Ways to Manage the Physical Symptoms of Anxiety**

The fight, flight or freeze response is like a smoke alarm. A smoke alarm will go off if there is a fire. It is helpful because it alerts us that there is a danger. However, a smoke alarm can also go off when there is a little bit of smoke and no real fire (e.g. if someone has burnt toast). The fight, flight or freeze response is the same. It is useful as it alerts use to danger but it can sometimes fo off when there is none. We DO NOT want to get rid of the alarm. We want to bring the anxiety down to a more manageable level so it works properly for us.

**Controlled belly breathing** is a key way to calm our physiology, to reduce the sensitivity of the alarm system. Here’s why:

**The autonomic nervous system**: This is the regulatory system relevant to the old parts of our brain. It has two branches:

* **Sympathetic nervous system:** Responsible for arousal, including the ‘fight, flight, freeze’ response. It speeds up the body to take action and increases our heart rate. It is activated when we **breathe in**.
* **Parasympathetic nervous system:** Puts a brake on arousal and promotes self-preservation (e.g. sleep). It slows down our heart rate, relaxes our muscles and helps us calm down. It is activated when we **breathe out**.

We need a good balance between these two systems to function well. Belly breathing helps us with this. One of the most common symptoms of anxiety is hyperventilation or over-breathing – breathing too fast and taking in more oxygen than you need. This can cause tightness of the chest and lots of other unpleasant sensations such as feeling faint. Breathing is one of the easiest physical sensations to control by yourself. Try controlling your breathing by following the instructions on your **worksheet**. You should practise calming your breathing many times before using it to control the symptoms of anxiety – you may find it takes many attempts before you are able to breathe calmly when you feel panicky. It is a good idea to practise this technique when you do not feel anxious so that you can use it easily when you do experience anxiety.

**Relaxation:** Relaxation is a very useful way of coping with the physical symptoms of anxiety. When someone has been anxious for a long time they are often unaware of the tension in their muscles, or the knot in their stomach, which is a result of the body’s reaction to stress. When we are stressed or anxious the muscles in our bodies tense up and this can cause uncomfortable bodily feelings like headache, backache, or tightness in the chest. The aches and pains of tension can cause mental worry, making us even more anxious and tense. People who are anxious and tense are often tired.Progressive Muscular Relation is one of the easiest forms of relaxation and involves tensing and relaxing all the major muscle groups in the body. Learn more on how to practise this technique by listening to your **relaxation CD.**

**Apps:** ‘5 Minute Relaxation’ and ‘Breathe2Relax’. Wellbeing website: <http://wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk/audio-resources/>

**Other helpful ways to relax**

* Relax your shoulders and avoid tightening and stiffening up
* Avoid fidgeting
* Keep your concentration on your surroundings – the ‘here and now’
* Stay calm and don’t rush e.g. slow down your speech
* Talking to yourself in a positive way can be helpful e.g. say to yourself ‘relax I can deal with this’ or ‘keep calm it will pass’

**Homework**

* Practice breathing and relaxation over the next week.
* Use a relaxation monitoring diary to record how you feel before and then after you practice these techniques.
* Continue to try 30 minutes of exercise over 3 days next week.

**Relaxation Diary**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Day** | **Time** | **Place** | **Relaxation Exercise** | **How relaxed before** | **How relaxed after** |
| **0=not relaxed at all/10=really relaxed** | |
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