

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal part of life, it helps to keep us safe.

So, why understand anxiety?

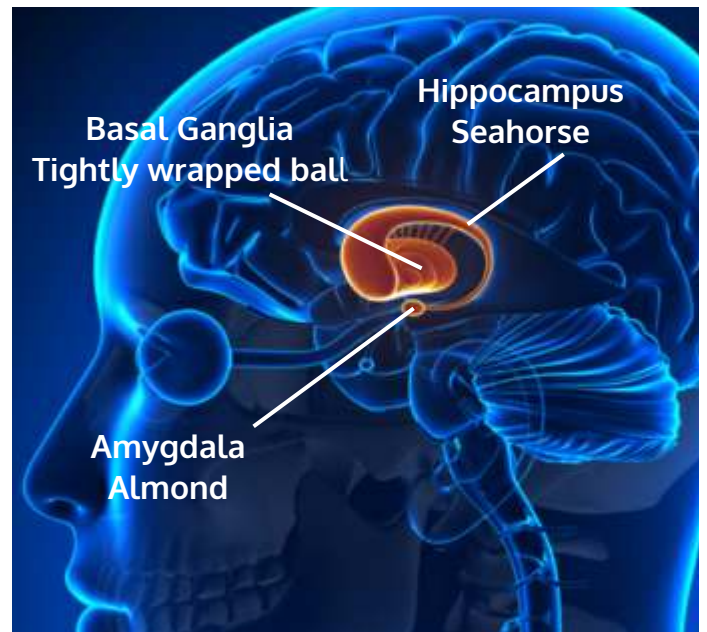
Anxiety is uncomfortable. It's meant to help us react to situations that are risky. Often however when we get anxious we find that we add to our anxiety with worrying thoughts. By understanding what is happening helps us worry less, and feel less anxious.

How do we get anxious?

The picture on the right shows the areas of the brain that are mainly responsible for how we generate feelings of anxiety and deciding how we react. They are the,

- **Amygdala**, which means shaped like an almond. It is responsible for *episodic memory*. It remembers the cues from important events, so when it notices them again it can help us respond to them. It doesn't remember the whole event just the bits it thinks are important, such as a smell, expression on a face, or the outline of an object. It has no sense of time. Events that happened long ago are as important as something that happened yesterday.
- **Hippocampus**, which means seahorse shaped. It is responsible for *spatial memory*. It helps to lay down memories and remember them again. It stitches together memories which are held all over the brain, so we can gain a sense of when they happened, in what order, and where.
- **Basal Ganglia**, which means "tightly wrapped ball" in Greek. It is responsible for deciding how we behave. *It can only choose to do something you already know how to do.*

To make us anxious, the Amygdala will notice something, it will send a signal, the Hippocampus will stitch together some memories that are associated with it, and then the Basal Ganglia will decide how to respond. This process is very fast, and all happens long before you are even consciously aware that something is going on. You can not stop your self from jumping if someone suddenly shouts "boo" at you.



This process also happens in reverse. If we remember an anxious event, the Hippocampus fires up, the Amygdala then fires in response to this piece of memory, and sets off a chain that results in the Basal Ganglia firing off and starting a response. Our breathing increases, our muscle tension rises, and we get ready for fight or flight. *This system treats events that you are remembering in exactly the same way as it does events that are happening right here, right now.*

How can you use this knowledge?

What increases distress is holding onto and amplifying feelings of anxiety. One of the reactions people often have when panicking is to think "I'm having a heart attack" These thoughts amplify feeling panicky, because they stitch together memories associated with it, and so your Amygdala is now also firing in response to "I'm going to die."

Just as you can increase your feeling of anxiety by how you think, you can also decrease it. When you are anxious **be kind to yourself**. Thank yourself for trying to keep you safe. Remind yourself you are just having anxious thoughts, and that you are safe right now. Focus on being in the here and now, notice your body, your breathing, your surroundings. These all help to focus this vital part of you where you need it to pay most attention.