

Anxiety, risk, fear or DANGER?

The purpose of anxiety is to keep you safe, so symptoms will occur as the fight or flight response acts for you in the event of actual danger, readying your body for the fight or the run - these feelings also of course warning you that there is danger.

However, in the event of you being extremely anxious, your fight or flight tends to be on a short fuse and reacts almost habitually even when you get only a hint of fear or anxiety – an anxiety thought, perhaps - often a ‘what if...?’

Eventually your body is so used to habitually feeling this way, the physical symptoms happen really easily. The problem with that being: they can no longer be relied upon as a true measure of how much danger you are truly facing, and as the physical symptoms are your body’s only way of communicating danger, you tend to read into them that you are indeed in peril, even if your thinking brain knows there is nothing to be afraid of.

For example: “*I **know** there are no unexploded bombs, or people waiting to attack me, yet I **feel** too anxious to go out*”.

Here’s a theory for you.

If symptoms = fear, and we know that fear is the natural response to danger, and your fight or flight’s only function is to help you in the event of danger (it doesn’t make you feel this way for fun) ... stay with me ... if you get the symptoms, then you must be in danger, right?

Er... but your fight or flight is on a hair trigger and goes off if a door creaks or the clock chimes so somewhere along the line it seems to have learned to kick the symptoms off when there is NO danger. So what are you going to do to decide if there is danger or not?

Below is a scale to help you decide if there is real impending horrible threat of actual danger, or just a fear ‘false alarm’. Every time you begin to experience the symptoms of anxiety (that before ten seconds ago we thought could only = danger) evaluate where you actually are on the scale in terms of actual, measurable, impending, real and unimagined DANGER i.e. physical threat. In the middle of an earthquake or bank robbery for example.

FEAR	DANGER
(FALSE ALARM)	ACTUAL IMPENDING THREAT

Here’s the helpful bit. The further away from ACTUAL THREAT you are, the closer you must be to the false alarm FEAR end. So start at the Danger end and work backwards. You’ll be cheating yourself if you only use your emotions to judge, because they’re driven by the false alarm part. You’ll need good old-fashioned reason. If you are not actually in measurable, imminent danger and threat of harm to your person, you’re at the wrong end!

Don’t forget, even getting out of bed in the morning carries just a teeny bit of risk (who hasn’t stubbed their toe on the cat...) but ‘risk’ isn’t the same as ‘danger’ so it may help to borrow someone else’s judgement when you first start getting used to this technique, especially if you find yourself rating ‘*waiting at the bus stop*’ as ‘*Argghhh – I might die*’ and using ‘*yeah, but.. what if...?*’ In this case, think how a level-headed friend would rate the danger.

What's the point? So... we will then have concrete evidence that what you are experiencing, whilst horrible, is actually habitual and learned false alarms/physical symptoms that should signify danger but are actually false alarms that need dealing with entirely differently as they are just physical echoes of old fear.

How is this helpful? If you did this twice a day for a hundred and twenty three years and hardly ever got more than a cm from the '*gosh it was a false alarm*' end, how do you think your thinking about your symptoms would change?

- Do it every time you start to feel anxious.
- Consider using this alongside other CBT tools that help retrain your out of control fight or flight.
- Do it lots.
- Don't wait a hundred and twenty three years before evaluating the results.
- It's OK to get assertive with your anxiety symptoms and show them who's boss.

Try completing one of these worksheets in a pro-active structured way when you have an anxiety provoking event to deal with

Event

Anxiety at outset

FEAR

DANGER

0 _____ 25 _____ 50 _____ 75 _____ 100
(FALSE ALARM) ACTUAL IMPENDING THREAT

Outcome

Rate you anxiety half way through Actual anxiety experience rating How was it?