Do you ever wonder why people worry?

If you’re often worried sick before school, you might have anxiety.

  
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By — Howard J. Bennett

Anxiety is a word you may not have heard before. It’s the grown-up word for feeling worried or nervous. If a person is anxious, he may feel as if something bad is going to happen.

Everyone has anxiety (pronounced ang-ZI-eh-tee) from time to time. In many cases, anxiety is good for you. If you didn’t worry about being hit by a car, you might not look both ways when crossing the street. If you didn’t worry about doing well on a test, you might not study enough.

But sometimes anxiety causes problems. If you’re so worried about a test that you can’t sleep at night, you may not do well because you’re tired the next day.

What is anxiety?

Humans and other animals have a built-in mechanism to help them in dangerous situations. It’s called the fight-or-flight response.

If you’re taking a walk and a stray dog starts to charge, you have to quickly decide whether to run away (flight), do something to frighten the dog (fight) or stay still (freeze). Your nervous system instantly coordinates a number of bodily changes to allow the flight or fight options. You breathe faster to get more air into your body. Your heart rate and blood pressure go up. More blood is sent to your muscles and less to such areas as your stomach and intestines. Your pupils get bigger so you can see better.

Once the conflict is over, your body returns to normal, though you may feel nervous and shaky for a while.

If you have anxiety in certain situations, such as speaking in front of a group of people, your fight-or-flight response has been turned on. If it’s turned on a lot, you may have a panic attack. If it’s turned on a little, you may get sweaty palms and “butterflies” in your stomach.

If you have anxiety every day, you may feel that things aren’t right. In this instance, your fight-or-flight response has been turned on just a little, so the symptoms are not as dramatic as with a panic attack. But that’s still a problem, because the fight-or-flight response is supposed to be a brief event to keep you safe. If it’s turned on day after day, even at a low level, it can make you feel sick inside.

What’s too much?

A lot of people don’t understand anxiety, which is why it can be hard for a person to realize he or she has the problem and seek help. If you had a bad sore throat, you wouldn’t hesitate to tell your parents. The same thing should be true for anxiety.

Here are some signs that you may have a problem.

• You worry a lot of the time.

• You avoid situations because you’re afraid something bad will happen.

• You worry so much that you don’t enjoy what you’re doing.

• You have lots of stomachaches, especially before school.

• You worry that you have a serious disease whenever you get sick.

If you think you have anxiety, talk to your parents about it. Anxiety runs in families, so Mom and Dad may have had similar issues. If they’re concerned that you have too much anxiety, they might take you to a therapist. A therapist is someone who can help you understand why you worry so much and can teach strategies to help overcome the problem.

But the most important thing is this: Don’t beat yourself up! Being anxious is not something you can simply turn off, and having anxiety does not make you a weak person. It’s something that you, your parents and your doctor can help control by working together.

It makes little sense, but a fear of flying is real

One way to know whether you have too much anxiety is to ask yourself if it’s logical to be worried about something. I’ll use myself as an example.

I’m afraid to fly. When I was a young adult, I avoided flying because I was so worried the plane would crash. Logically, I knew that flying was safer than driving. But whenever I was in a plane, some very unpleasant things would happen to me. I’d get really nervous. My heart rate would go up. I’d start to sweat and have an ache in my chest that made it difficult to breathe. I’d squeeze the armrests of my seat so hard that my hands and shoulders would hurt.

What I just described are the feelings that a person has during a panic attack. Although the “thinking” part of my brain knew I was safe, the “non-thinking” part turned on my fight-or-flight response, causing me to feel awful in the process. I wouldn’t calm down until the plane landed.

I still don’t like to fly, but I no longer avoid traveling by air. Nowadays, I take a medication that helps me calm down when I travel. But guess what? I am not embarrassed about my fear of flying. It’s definitely a pain in the neck, but I don’t feel that I’m less of a person because of it.

--H.B.

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