
Your Best You

Managing Your Anxiety

Health, Counselling and Disability Services
LaSalle Building, 146 Stuart Street

Your Best You

Your Best You: Managing Your Anxiety was written specifically for students at Queen's University to assist in educating about and improving practical coping skills to manage anxiety.

While Queen's students are our intended audience, we hope this resource will be shared with anyone who may benefit from its use.

To download a free copy of this book,
for information on purchasing a printed copy,
or to access an alternate format (for visual accessibility)

visit:

<http://hcds.queensu.ca>

Developed by:

Mary Acreman, PhD Candidate; Jenn Bossio, PhD Candidate;
Carole-Anne Vatcher, MSW, RSW; Freeman Woolnough, MEd, CCC;

Counselling Services

a division of

Health, Counselling and Disability Services

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Purpose of this Workbook

The purpose of this workbook is to improve the skills you use to manage your anxiety and general functioning. It is important to note that anxiety can vary significantly in intensity and duration. The workbook is designed as a useful guide to managing anxiety of varying intensity, but is not intended to replace professional treatment where this is required.

The workbook is NOT intended as a sole resource for anyone experiencing significant symptoms of anxiety. If you believe you may meet the criteria for a clinical anxiety disorder, we strongly urge you to seek professional assistance.

The workbook is NOT a replacement for professional treatment. Please call Health, Counselling and Disability Services to arrange an appointment with a counsellor or family physician if needed. For more information on other resources, see Appendix A.

Health, Counselling and Disability Services (HCDS)

LaSalle Building, 146 Stuart Street

Counselling Services: 613-533-6000 ext. 78264

Health Services: 613-533-2506

<http://hcds.queensu.ca>

The workbook is based on empirically validated research and clinical experience related to the effective treatment of mild to moderate anxiety. The book may be used alone when symptoms are mild, or as an aid to treatment with a mental health professional.

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Understanding Your Anxiety

Introduction

Welcome to the Queen's University Health, Counselling and Disability Services Anxiety Workbook!

Sometimes life can be stressful – that is especially true for anyone in university. When stress gets the better of us we can start to see it impact us in many realms of our life: school, family, friends, our health and happiness. The purpose of this workbook is to help guide you through the challenges of dealing with stress. Along the way, we will talk about what anxiety is, how it can be a positive thing, and when to recognize that it is becoming too big for us to handle. We also include many helpful tools and worksheets that you can learn how to use in order to manage your anxiety.

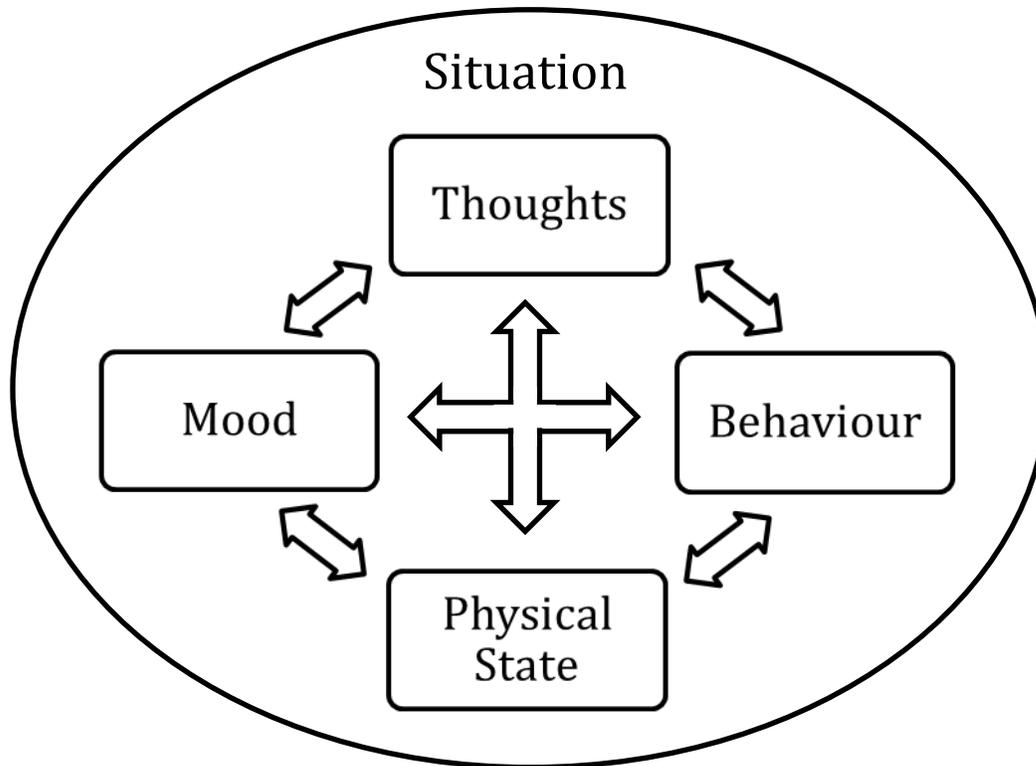
Remember, this workbook is intended to help reduce your anxiety, not become yet another thing on your to-do list. With some persistence and dedication, you can learn to take control of your anxiety and make it work for you instead of against you. Let's get started!

The Five Factor Model:

Before moving into solutions for reducing anxiety, it's important to understand what anxiety is and how it operates.

Throughout this workbook, we will be using central concepts and strategies adapted from **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**. CBT is a short-term therapy that has been shown to be very effective in the treatment of anxiety. One of the central concepts underlying the practice of CBT is the inter-relationship between our thoughts, physical state, behaviour, and mood, in response to our situation or environment.

Five Factor Model



As you can see from the illustration above, our ability to function is influenced by these five factors. All of these factors have an impact on one another; a change in one area will often produce change in another.

To illustrate, let's use the example of someone preparing to write an exam (**situation**). This could lead to a number of different **thoughts**, such as "I don't know the material" or "I'm going to fail". Thinking these thoughts, we might imagine that this student would become anxious (**mood**). Being anxious might lead to unpleasant **physical** symptoms such as a nervous stomach or heart racing. The physical sensations might then lead to more anxious **thoughts**, such as "If I'm anxious I won't be able to focus when writing my exam". The **thoughts** and the **physical** sensations might then lead this student to get up and surf the Internet for two hours (**behaviour**) in an effort to reduce their anxiety (**mood**).

Everyone's pattern of how these five factors relate might be different, but if you look closely you'll see that these factors do indeed intertwine in your life as well. By using interventions that target each of the five factors, you can develop healthy coping strategies that will reduce your anxiety and improve your overall functioning. Throughout this workbook you'll find strategies that will help you to intervene and reduce your own anxiety in all of these five key areas.

Understanding Anxiety

Let's talk a little bit about what anxiety is and where it comes from.

First, it's important to understand that anxiety is a built-in human evolutionary survival mechanism. Just like all animals have evolved some kind of built-in biological survival mechanism to help protect them from predators, anxiety is our built-in response system for responding to physical danger. Our earliest ancestors survived because they experienced anxiety—also called the **fight-or-flight** response—in the face of a physical threat, which helped to mobilize them both mentally and physically to either stay and fight a predator, or to flee to safety by running. In this way we are physiologically hardwired to be on high alert in the face of danger. The fight-or-flight response immediately triggers multiple complex changes in our bodies and minds that stomp on the gas pedal and take action in the face of danger. In other words—from a survival perspective—anxiety is a good thing! The chart below describes the changes that occur in our bodies when in fight-or-flight mode. Which of these do you experience when you are feeling anxious?

Anxiety in the Body

Symptom	What we feel	Why it's good
Heart rate increases	Chest pounding, heart racing	Pumping oxygen to muscles and the brain for quick reaction
Breathing rate increase	Shallow, rapid breathing, possible hyperventilation	Increases amount of oxygen available to body, especially the brain
Muscles tense	Tight muscles, soreness in the limbs if prolonged tension	Increased strength to flee or take on physical threats
Perspiration	Warmth, sweating	Cools down the increased level of heat in the body
Pupils dilate	Sensitivity to light, take in more details	Able to take in more sensory information about a potential threat
Mind racing	Rapid thoughts, hard to concentrate/focus on other tasks	Able to quickly respond to an immediate threat

Focused attention	Certain details become more available, others seem less important	Able to notice quickly if anything changes about a potential threat
Shaking	Shaking hands	Response to adrenalin
Goose bumps	Hair raises, bumpy skin	Response to muscle tension
Immune system slows	Tend to get sick easier, or illnesses last longer	Energy from immune system is directed toward maintaining other protective responses
Digestive system slows	Loss of appetite, nausea, or in certain cases get cravings for 'quick' food (fats/sugars)	Energy from digestive system is directed toward maintaining other protective responses

The above table highlights many of the physiological changes (changes in the body) that happen as a result of anxiety. To add a bit more context, you can think of each person as having a **gas pedal** and a **brake pedal** for our stress. The gas pedal is what we call the **sympathetic nervous system**. This is what kicks the fight-or-flight response into gear, and once that gas pedal has been pressed and the fight-or-flight response has momentum, the only way to stop it is by hitting the brake pedal. That brake pedal is known as the **parasympathetic nervous system**. Once we hit this brake pedal, it sends a signal from our brain down the vagus nerve—a big long nerve that runs throughout our body and branches into all of the body parts typically effected by stress (e.g., lungs, heart, GI tract). This nerve tells our brain to stop searching for danger, it tells our heartbeat to slow down, our muscles to relax, and our GI track to resume its regularly scheduled programming. You can learn to train your brake pedal to activate using a number of different tools, which we will discuss soon.

What this means for us now...

In modern times, most of us rarely see physical threats to our lives anymore (except in exceptional circumstances). Rather, we tend to experience anxiety at differing levels of intensity in response to life stressors, or to perceived threats to our *social* survival, such as the fear of not getting a job, doing poorly on an exam, or losing someone close to us. It is crucial to remember throughout this workbook that anxiety is a *normal human response* to a stressor or perceived threat for which we are biologically hardwired. We all experience anxiety at different times. It's not desirable or even possible to eliminate anxiety entirely.

The difficulty with anxiety in modern times, however, is that we get 'stuck' with our foot on the gas (as though we are being threatened by a predator) and can't let go. Over time, this can begin to impede your ability to function in your life academically or personally. It can also lead you to experience ongoing distress, reduce your ability to enjoy your life, and eventually can lead to symptoms of exhaustion and burnout, which can further reduce your ability to function. While small amounts of anxiety in short bursts can actually be beneficial (such bursts can help energize you to focus and be mentally sharp, for example, when writing an exam or preparing an assignment under a tight deadline), we were not built

to withstand prolonged exposure to the fight-or-flight response, and long periods of moderate to high anxiety take their toll.

Some of us are more prone to anxiety and worry than others. Regardless of your predisposition to anxiety, it is certain that we live in a society that breeds stress. This is especially true in university where the pressure for high grades, many extracurriculars, and trying to find a job after graduation are omnipresent. At the same time stress does not end at graduation; learning anxiety management skills now can be enormously beneficial for you in your life as you go forward. If you experience a great deal of anxiety or stress, this workbook provides techniques and strategies that can help you to self-soothe, calm, moderate, and reduce your anxiety to a more manageable level.

Outline of the Workbook

In this workbook you will find (1) a description of different forms of anxiety that students often experience; (2) instructions for Basic Anxiety Management Skills; and (3) a chapter on each of 4 forms of anxiety commonly experienced by Queen's students.