

### **Understanding the Problem (cognitive behavioral model)**

Anxiety, stress, panic, worry; these symptoms are very uncomfortable and distressing to experience. One thing that can help you manage your anxiety is to understand how it works. You can then begin to identify patterns of anxiety in your own life and work towards changing them.

**Why am I anxious?** Anxiety is complex, but is probably caused by a combination of genetic factors and environment. Everyone is anxious from time to time, but some people are more prone to high levels of anxiety than others.

**Is anxiety harmful?** Short-term stress and anxiety are not harmful, and are a normal part of life. However, chronic high levels of stress and anxiety are not healthy for our minds or bodies, but there are good treatments available that can help.

**How does it work?** There are three main components to anxiety. An easy way to remember them is to think of the “Three B’s” – your Body, Brain, and Behavior.

**Body:** Anxiety is felt in the body because it activates the sympathetic nervous system. Heart rate increases, sweating, shaking, feeling hot, tightness in the chest, muscle tension, GI distress, stomachache, dizziness, etc. are all normal things to experience when you are anxious. These symptoms do not mean that something terrible is happening or that something is very wrong with your body. They are a normal part of how our bodies react to feared situations. They are only a problem when they are happening in situations that are not objectively dangerous.

**Brain (thoughts):** Anxiety cues the brain to focus attention on threat. This means that when we are stressed and anxious, we are more likely to have thoughts about what could be wrong. We are also more likely to make certain thinking errors; for example, thinking that the risk of bad things happening is higher than it really is. It is also common to think that things would be disastrous or catastrophic, and forget ways that we could cope with difficulties.

**Behavior:** Anxiety creates a powerful urge to avoid, or escape things that create fear. For example, if someone is socially anxious, they might avoid situations where they fear being critically evaluated or judged, like parties or public speaking. Someone who is having panic attacks might avoid places where they are afraid they will become anxious. Avoidance works to decrease anxiety in the short term, but over time can maintain or even increase anxiety.

**The cycle of anxiety:** The body, brain, and behavior all work together, creating a cycle of anxiety. When we think anxious thoughts, our body responds with anxious symptoms. When our bodies are anxious, we are more likely to think anxious thoughts. When we avoid, we are more likely to think situations are dangerous, even if they are safe. All of the three B’s work together and tend to maintain anxiety.

**How do I break the cycle?** There are excellent, well-researched treatments that can help you feel less anxious, including medication and cognitive-behavioral therapy. The Anxiety Disorders Association of America ([adaa.org](http://adaa.org)) is a good place to learn more and find resources to help.

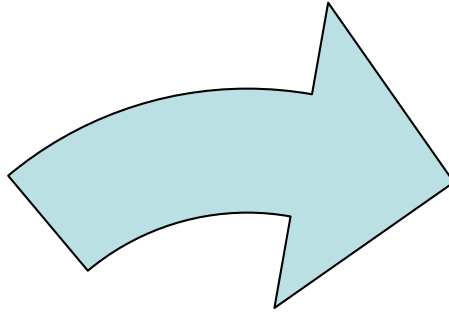
**Understanding your anxiety:** On the back of this sheet, you can jot down ideas about how your anxiety is working. Starting to identify patterns is a good first step in finding ways to manage the anxiety and feel better. See if you can step back when you are anxious and identify how your body is feeling, what you are thinking, and anything you are avoiding or want to avoid.

**“Body”** (what do you notice in your body when you are anxious?)

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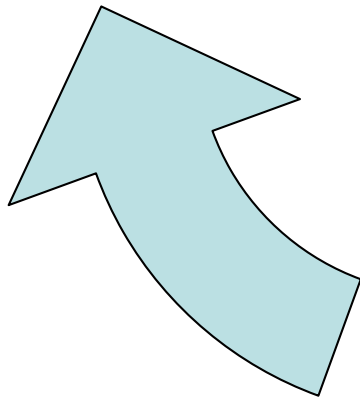


**“Brain” / Thoughts** \_\_\_\_\_

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**“Behavior”** / what I typically do or don't do \_\_\_\_\_

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