

You are probably reading this because you are currently feeling like you are suffering with anxiety, or maybe you know someone close to you who is. Please know that whatever it is you are experiencing right now, you are not alone, and you do not have to carry this weight by yourself.

Anxiety is a completely natural, human response to stress or perceived threat. Historically, it served as an essential survival mechanism—the "fight, flight, or freeze" response—designed to protect us from immediate physical dangers. However, in modern life, this internal alarm system can become overly sensitive, triggering intense worry, fear, and physiological distress even when no immediate physical danger is present.

An Essential Distinction: It is important to note that we do not want to eliminate anxiety entirely. We still fundamentally need anxiety because it serves a vital purpose: protecting us from actual, immediate danger by keeping us alert, focused, and ready to act when real safety threats arise. The goal of therapy is not to clear away this natural shield, but rather to tune it so it does not disrupt your everyday life when you are safe.

What Does Anxiety Feel Like?

Anxiety rarely occurs in isolation; it is an interconnected experience. When a situation triggers a perception of threat, it instantly ripples across our thoughts, our physical biology, and our behaviour.

1. The Situation (Perceived Threat Example)

An everyday trigger that the brain misinterprets as unsafe:

- Receiving an ambiguous email from a manager saying, "Can we chat tomorrow?"
- Walking into a crowded, noisy social event or room.
- Noticing a minor, unfamiliar physical sensation in your body.

2. Thoughts (Cognitive Response)

The automatic, future-focused "what-ifs" that flash through your mind:

- "I have made a massive mistake and I am going to be fired."
- "Everyone is looking at me and judging how awkward I am."
- "What if something is seriously wrong with my health?"

3. Physical Symptoms (Biological Autonomic Response)

The physical nervous system rushing into fight-or-flight:

- Rapid, pounding heartbeat or tight, heavy chest.

4. Behaviours (Action & Coping Strategy)

The immediate adjustments we make to manage the discomfort:

- **Avoidance:** Postponing replying, staying at home, or leaving the event early.

- Shallow breathing, dizziness, or feeling lightheaded.
- Tight muscles, clamped jaw, or a sudden nervous knot in the stomach.

- **Safety Behaviours:** Constantly checking your phone, over-preparing, or seeking reassurance.
- Restlessness, pacing, fidgeting, or snapping out of frustration.

The Anxiety Loop

When anxiety takes hold, it often establishes a self-reinforcing cycle. A stressful thought triggers a physical symptom (like a fast heart rate), and our brain interprets that physical discomfort as confirmation that something is genuinely wrong. This leads to increased worry, creating an escalating loop. Often, we begin avoiding situations to escape these uncomfortable feelings, which inadvertently reinforces the anxiety over time.

An Effective Framework for Relief

In our therapeutic work, we can visualise anxiety as an interaction between how we perceive threat versus how we perceive our own resilience. This can be understood through a classic cognitive framework:

$$\text{Anxiety} = \text{Perceived Danger (Overestimated)} \times \text{Coping Confidence (Underestimated)}$$

When anxiety flares up, our mind naturally overestimates the likelihood and severity of danger while significantly underestimating our internal confidence and capacity to cope. Through structured counselling, we work to rebalance this equation—helping you realistically evaluate risks while rebuilding trust in your own coping resources.

Practical Steps to Manage Anxiety

While counselling provides a deep, personalised space to resolve the root causes of anxiety, you can begin practising these immediate grounding tools today:

1. Box Breathing (Calming the Physiology)

When you feel panic rising, change your physiology directly. Inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, exhale fully for 4 seconds, and hold empty for 4 seconds. Repeat this cycle 4 or 5 times to signal to your nervous system that you are safe.

2. The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

Bring your awareness back to the present moment by naming: 5 things you can see, 4 things you can physically feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 positive thing you can taste or say to yourself. This shifts focus away from future-focused "what-ifs."

3. Thought Challenging

Anxious thoughts are opinions, not objective facts. When an anxious thought surfaces, gently ask yourself: *Is this thought 100% accurate? What is the actual evidence for it? Am I overestimating the worst-case scenario?*

How Counselling Can Help

Anxiety can make you feel isolated, but you do not have to navigate it alone. In a safe, confidential space, we work together at **JPL Counselling** to explore the origins of your anxiety, identify your unique triggers, and build tailored boundaries and coping strategies that give you your control back. Growth, balance, and peace of mind are completely achievable.

Take the next step toward a calmer, more balanced life.

To book a session or find more emotional well-being resources, please visit:

www.jplcounselling.co.uk