

Understanding Anxiety: Body, Emotions, and Thoughts

Sanden Breust

The Idea

Anxiety is not just one feeling. It is made up of three connected parts: your body, your emotions, and your thoughts. These systems constantly influence each other, which is why anxiety can build quickly.

What This Means

Think of anxiety as a system rather than a single problem.

- Your **body** reacts (e.g. racing heart, tight chest)
- Your **emotions** respond (e.g. fear, worry, dread)
- Your **thoughts** interpret (e.g. “Something is wrong”)

Each part feeds into the others. A change in one can quickly affect the rest.

This matters because different parts need different strategies. If you don’t know which system is most active, you may use the wrong approach. It’s like treating the wrong injury, effort without results.

Instead, the goal is simple: **Notice which part is most active, and respond to that system directly.**

The Body: Your Alarm System

What’s Happening

Anxiety activates your body’s built-in survival system. Its job is to keep you safe.

When your brain detects a threat, your body prepares to:

- Fight
- Run

- React quickly

This leads to physical changes:

- Faster heart rate
- Rapid breathing
- Muscle tension
- Sweating
- Restlessness
- Stomach discomfort

These sensations can feel intense, even frightening. But they are not dangerous. They are your body trying to protect you.

The problem is this: When the threat is psychological (not physical), there is nothing to fight or run from. The energy stays in your body and can build.

You may then start worrying about the sensations themselves:

- “Why is my heart racing?”
- “Something must be wrong”

This increases anxiety further, creating a cycle.

What You Can Do (Body)

The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to **lower your physical arousal** so your brain recognises you are safe.

Try:

- Slow, steady breathing (longer exhales than inhales)
- Grounding (notice 5 things you can see, hear, feel)

- Gentle movement (walking, stretching)
- Cold water on your face or hands
- Focusing on textures or scents

You can also use a simple statement:

- “This is not an emergency”

These strategies won’t solve the problem itself. They help shift your brain out of survival mode so you can think more clearly.

The Emotional Side: Allowing the Feeling

What’s Happening

The emotional part of anxiety is what most people notice first.

It often feels like:

- Worry
- Nervousness
- Unease
- Dread

Anxiety usually focuses on the future what might happen.

At low levels, it can be helpful. It can motivate preparation or focus. But when it becomes constant or intense, it can affect:

- Sleep
- Concentration
- Energy

A common reaction is to fight the feeling or try to get rid of it. This often makes it stronger.

What You Can Do (Emotions)

Start with **acknowledgement and acceptance**.

Instead of resisting the feeling, try:

- “This is anxiety”
- “I don’t like it, but I can handle it”
- “It will pass”

This may feel unnatural at first. That’s okay. With practice, it becomes easier.

The key steps are:

1. **Identify** the feeling
2. **Acknowledge** it without judgement
3. **Allow** it to rise and fall

You don’t need to fight it. In fact, the less you fight it, the less intense it often becomes.

A helpful mindset:

“I can feel this and still move forward.”

The Thinking Side: What Your Mind Tells You

What’s Happening

When you feel anxious, your thinking often shifts toward threat.

Common patterns include:

- Expecting the worst
- Overestimating risk

- Doubting your ability to cope
- Wanting certainty

For example:

You send a message and don't get a reply. Your mind might say:

- "I said something wrong"
- "They're upset with me"

These thoughts feel real, even when they are not accurate.

Catastrophic thinking has a purpose. Your brain is trying to prepare for every possibility by focusing on the worst-case scenario. The problem is that the worst-case is often unrealistic and overwhelming.

What You Can Do (Thoughts)

You don't need to eliminate anxious thoughts. You need to **change how you respond to them.**

Try these strategies:

1. Name the Thought

- "That's my anxiety talking"
- Give it a label (e.g. "the worst-case story")

This creates distance.

2. Check the Evidence

- What supports this thought?
- What doesn't?

3. Consider Alternatives

Ask:

- "What else could be true?"

For example:

- “Maybe they’re busy”
- “Maybe they didn’t see it”

4. Weigh the Cost

- Is this way of thinking helping me?
- What is it doing to my mood or behaviour?

5. Use Mental Reset Exercises

Try a simple distraction:

- Pick an object
- Spell it out
- Create words from each letter

This helps interrupt the anxiety cycle.

Bringing It Together

These three systems don’t operate separately. They work together in a loop:

1. Your body reacts
2. You feel anxious
3. Your thoughts interpret danger

This then feeds back into the body.

For example:

- Your heart races (body)
- You feel worry or fear (emotion)
- You think “Something is wrong” (thought)

This increases the physical response, and the cycle continues.

Why This Matters

When anxiety feels like one overwhelming experience, it can seem uncontrollable.

But when you break it down, you gain options.

You can:

- Calm your body
- Allow your emotions
- Question your thoughts

You don't need to fix everything at once. Just start with the system that feels strongest in that moment.

Check-In / Reflection

Take a moment to reflect:

- When I feel anxious, what do I notice first? Body, emotions, or thoughts?
- What physical signs show up for me?
- What thoughts tend to appear?
- How do I usually respond?
- What is one strategy I could try next time anxiety shows up?

Key Idea

Anxiety becomes more manageable when you break it into body, emotions, and thoughts and respond to each part in a simple, targeted way.