

Why We Get Anxious (And What To Do About It)

So, anxiety helps us do the fundamental things any animal needs to do if it wants to see the sunrise: avoid threats, approach rewards, and attach to others. Some of the ways it does this are pretty obvious, including in the classic fight-flight-freeze reactions. But some are less obvious. A little anxiety, for example, helps us remember to get some more milk at the store, or to get that work task done on time.

Anxiety also helps us maintain and strengthen our relationships. For instance, young children get anxious at being separated from their parents, which motivates them to stay close – which is safer for them today much as it was back in the Stone Age. With my wife, if I can start to tell that she was rattled or hurt by something I said, the uneasiness and even alarm that this stirs up in me prods me to reach out to her and find out what went wrong, and how to make it right.

And all this happens in the blink of an eye. The brain labels a phenomenon: that rustling in the grass is a snake! Two parts of the brain in particular, the amygdala and the hippocampus in the limbic system, quickly categorize it as pleasant (approach!), unpleasant (avoid!), or neutral (move on). And based on this labeling, the brain initiates a two-pronged reaction through both the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine (hormonal) system.

For example, the sympathetic branch of the nervous system could speed up the heart to bring more blood to muscles for fighting or fleeing, and meanwhile the hypothalamic – pituitary – adrenal axis could start sending a cascade of adrenaline and cortisol coursing through your veins.

Now, how can we apply all this to become more skillful at dealing with things that make us fearful, anxious, worried or alarmed?

First, we can accept and love the parts of ourselves that feel frightened. Often we're ashamed of these and scorn them. What happens when you befriend them instead? These instincts may not always be helpful, but they're here to help. Everyone has them. It's evolutionarily helpful to be afraid sometimes. This is natural.

Most importantly, don't beat yourself up for having a hard time. These are hard times.

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Second, see if you can get to know another part of yourself, too: the part of you that does know how to cope.

Here's how that works—you can try it right now if you like. Step back and recall a time you were determined and hung in there and got through a tough situation or period in your life. Take a moment to get in touch with what this felt like—in the body as well as in the mind. What does it feel like to be determined? To be patient and enduring? To make a good plan and take skillful action?

By calling up these states of being that are at the heart of resilience, you “light up” their underlying neural circuitry. And when you repeatedly activate this neural circuitry, you strengthen it through what's called “experience-dependent neuroplasticity” – which means, in plain English, that you can hardwire greater resilience into your own brain. This really works.

Lastly, I'd like to finish with a brief passage from one of my favorite books, *Dune*, by Frank Herbert:

I will face my fear.
I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path.
Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.
Only I will remain.

For more of Dr. Rick Hanson's evidence-based strategies for dealing with anxiety, check out his free online course [How to Fight Anxiety and Fear](#) and his talks in the Ten Percent Happier app.



Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a psychologist and New York Times best-selling author. He's been an invited speaker at NASA, Oxford, Stanford, Harvard, and meditation centers worldwide. His newest book is *Neurodharma: New Science, Ancient Wisdom, and Seven Practices of the Highest Happiness*.