

# Anxiety

We all feel anxious sometimes. It is a natural and useful feeling which helps keep us safe from harm. However, sometimes anxiety can cause problems.

If we are feeling anxious a lot of the time, if anxiety is stopping us from doing things we enjoy, or if anxiety is making us very distressed, we may want to do something about it.

**There are many ways of explaining and understanding anxiety.  
One way, is to view anxiety as your bodyguard.**

## The Bodyguard (Anxiety)

**Your bodyguard's job is to keep you safe.**

They look out for potential danger and warn you of anything which might harm you.



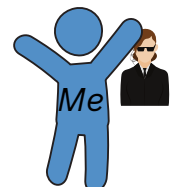
It is useful having a bodyguard.

They often do a great job keeping us safe.

**However, they can become overprotective.**

*How will I know if my bodyguard is becoming overprotective?*

Our bodyguard should be **in the background**, watching for signs of danger, but **not playing a big role** in our thoughts and life.



If our bodyguard starts playing a **big role in our thoughts and life**, and is **often warning us not to do things**, it may have become overprotective.



**The overprotective bodyguard** warns us that things may harm us when in fact they are safe.



*What can I do if I have an overprotective bodyguard?*

You can help your bodyguard by doing your own **risk assessments**.



## Risk Assessments

If our bodyguard warns us that something may harm us, we can **look at the evidence** to see if they are correct or being overprotective.

How we do this assessment will depend on the risk we are assessing, but questions like this may be helpful:


- What is the potential danger/harm?
- How likely is it to happen?
- How bad would it be if it happened?
- Can the risk be reduced?



### Important Note on Risk Assessments

We all experience the world differently so things which are 'safe' for some people may cause harm for others.

For example, wearing a shirt and tie,  being in a room with a ticking clock, 

or speaking in front of a large audience 

may feel safe for some people but cause physical pain, sensory overload or even trauma for someone else.

**The Risk Assessment therefore must be based on YOUR experience of the world.**

## Risk Assessment Outcomes



### You may conclude:

There is a genuine risk of harm.  
Your bodyguard was correct and you should listen to them on this occasion.



### You may conclude:

There is some risk, but

- it is low and the benefits outweigh the risk

or

- the risk can be reduced to an acceptable level

**Example:** You may conclude that sitting an exam will cause temporary distress **but** appropriate accommodations will reduce the distress **and** the benefits outweigh the risk.



### You may conclude:

There is a low risk of harm.  
Your bodyguard was being overprotective.

Even if we **KNOW** our bodyguard was wrong, we may still **FEEL** the anxiety.

Our bodyguard may have activated the alarm system in our brain which make us **FEEL** like we're in danger.  
It can take time and practice to turn the alarm system off.



## The Alarm System



If our bodyguard thinks we are in danger, they **activate the alarm system** in our brain.

There is a small structure in our brain called the amygdala.

The amygdala's job is to **detect danger**.



When our bodyguard senses danger and activates the alarm, our amygdala releases **hormones** into our body.

The **hormones** prepare our body to manage the threat.

This is sometimes called the **'fight, flight or freeze' response**.

This may be helpful if, for example, the threat was a bear. The hormones prepare our bodies to:

**fight off** the bear



**run away** from the bear



or **freeze** (so the bear moves on without noticing us)



However, if our **'fight, flight or freeze'** response is activated when there is NO DANGER, the hormones still prepare our bodies prepare for **'fight, flight or freeze'** but as none of those responses are appropriate we are often left feeling **heightened and distressed**.

How does the **'fight, flight or freeze'** response help us respond to danger?

Vision		Thinking
Hearing		Head
Breathing		Heart
Bladder		Stomach
Hands		Muscles

What changes do you notice in these (or other) parts of your body when you are in **'fight, flight or freeze'**?

### Deactivating the Alarm System

Knowing that your bodyguard can be overprotective, and understanding how your alarm system works and makes you feel, are important steps in managing problematic anxiety.

Learning ways of deactivating the alarm system can also be helpful.



With time and practice, your bodyguard can be firmly in the background, watching for danger, but not playing a big role in your thoughts and life.

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