

Anxiety: An Altered State of Consciousness

Sensitivity and Anxiety

The best way to understand your anxiety reaction is to realize that you are sensitized. Certain triggers associated with flying (and perhaps other situations as well) create strong physiological arousals in your body. Most people experience this arousal as a whoosh of fear. Think of yourself as allergic to these triggers, because your reaction is similar to allergic reactions. A person who has hay fever and is allergic to ragweed pollen would have a strong reaction to pollen, whereas others who do not have this allergy would have none. Similarly, as a sensitized person, you have a strong reaction to triggers that cause almost no reaction in others.

As a person who is afraid of flying, your mental images and bodily sensations of, for example, turbulence, might produce an intense physiological rush of fear. Or, the images of being confined in the plane might set off a strong anxiety reaction. For many, the image of being overwhelmed by their own fear is a powerful trigger that also produces an intense whoosh of fear. You feel it in your body: Your heart might start to beat strongly, you might feel sensations of heat, and your breathing might feel tight and unnatural. You become terrified.

Remember, anxiety is not just in your mind; it is also a measurable bodily reaction. Certain thoughts and mental images produce an automatic reaction in your body. It is not your fault. You are not faking it, and it takes more than just willpower to get over it.

The Role of the Amygdala in Becoming Sensitized

We have come a long way from the time when people with anxiety disorders were called “weak,” “lazy,” or “cowards.” We now know that the brain has been inadvertently programmed to make the body anxious. We know how that happens and the parts of the brain that are involved. Also, we know what is required in order to “rewire” the brain so that the fear-producing circuits are not so easily triggered.

The amygdala is the part of the brain that controls fear and anxiety. Any signal that we perceive as a possible threat is processed in the brain’s switchboard (the thalamus), which divides the signal in two and sends it along two different paths, both of which lead to the amygdala. One path leads directly to the amygdala, which triggers the “fight, flight, or freeze” arousal system. We become frightened and aroused, ready to defend ourselves, get out of the way, or (if all else fails) freeze in place. The other path takes a quick detour to the cortex—the part of the brain that controls rational thought—where the brain determines if we are actually in danger. This half of the signal arrives at the amygdala after the detour through the cortex.

So, for example, imagine you hear a loud sound. That sound goes to the brain’s switchboard and is sent on to the amygdala via two pathways. On the direct path to the

amygdala, the sound triggers an immediate rush of fear. About a half second later, the other part of the signal arrives after having been processed by the cortex. Your brain determines that the loud sound is a pot crashing down and that no danger exists. Based on that information, your amygdala calms you down. This means that you were afraid before you knew whether there was any danger. Your fear reaction was immediate and reflexive but not based on danger.

Think of a friend surprising you in your home and yelling “BOO!” when you thought you were alone. You get a jolt of fear and then realize there is no danger, even though you might need a few minutes to calm down completely. This is the process at work.

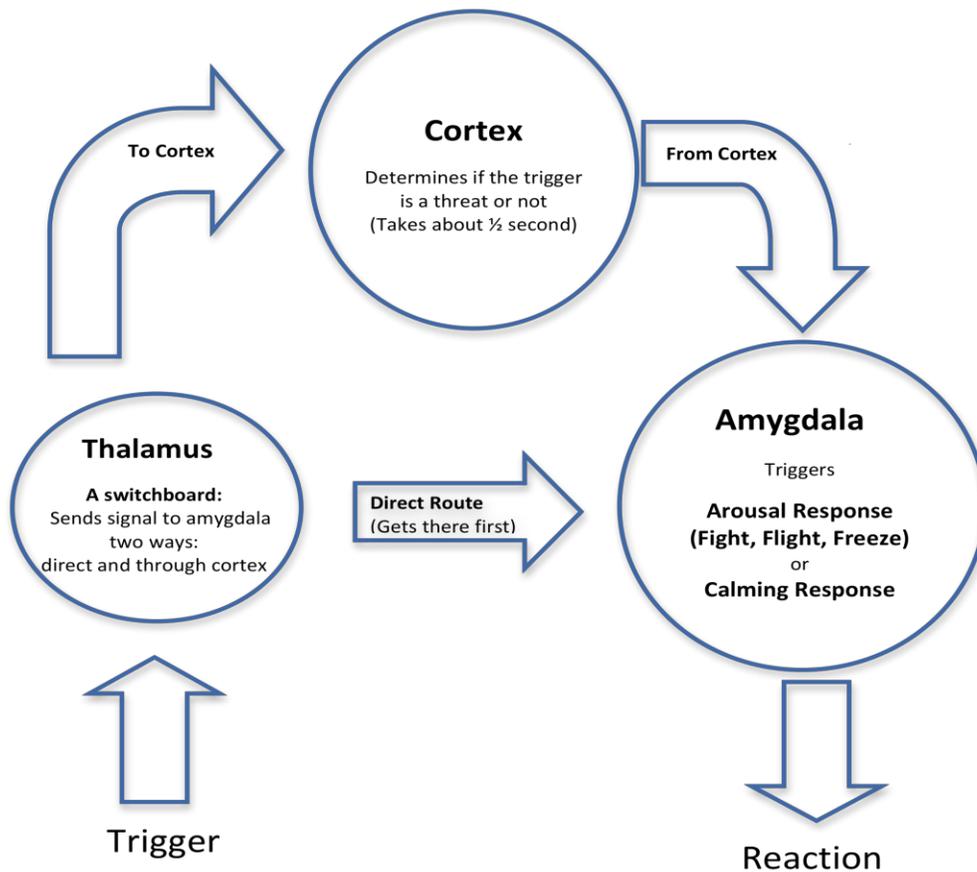
Because you are sensitized to triggers relating to flying, you have a lot of circuits wired to the amygdala setting up an arousal alarm. This fear trigger becomes stuck and cannot be overridden by information provided by the cortex. That is why you stay frightened, even when you realize that your fear is unrealistic. The brain circuits triggered by your amygdala have become too ingrained.

If you are afraid of turbulence, think of how frightened you feel as the plane bumps around, even though you have digested all the material telling you that turbulence adds no risk at all to the safety of your flight. This is an example of the circuit to your amygdala over-riding the information coming from your cortex.

There is a saying in neurology that “circuits that fire together, wire together.” Your brain has become wired to keep you anxious about plane travel; we have to rewire your brain to reduce this connection. Our task is to allow the realistic information from your reasoning cortex to connect to your amygdala. That allows the calming process to become ingrained. The active ingredients for making this change are (1) exposure to what frightens you, while (2) practicing new methods of anxiety management. That is what we do at Freedom to Fly Now.

Diagram 1 is a representation of these circuits in your brain.

DIAGRAM 1



Anxiety Alters Consciousness

In ordinary thinking, the differences between our thoughts and actions are clear. We understand that our thoughts and our actions are independent. Our mind is filled with thoughts that involve planning, organizing our day, and imagining a variety of situations. We can lose ourselves in a novel or magazine article and experience the excitement of travel or the joys and pain of a love affair. We can imagine the satisfaction of finishing a difficult task. And if someone hurts our feelings, we can imagine how we might respond to that person.

In ordinary thinking, thoughts help us plan what we want to do and allow us to play out—in our minds—the possible consequences of imagined actions. Our thoughts are a safe way to imagine scenarios that do not lead to consequences in the real world.

But anxiety changes that. As we become more anxious, our thoughts increasingly frighten us. If we are sensitized to an image, just thinking about that image feels frightening and dangerous. We try to avoid thinking these frightening thoughts, but they intrude themselves into our mind. The more we try to avoid them, the more they seem to persist. The distinction between thoughts and actions starts to blur. When we are very anxious, thinking about something can feel as scary as it happening. As we approach panic, our thoughts feel outright dangerous.

This is **anxious thinking**, and it is the altered state of consciousness that many of us experience when we travel by airplane, or even anticipate taking a flight at some point in the future. Let's examine six of the most significant differences between ordinary thinking and anxious thinking, and see how they add to your fears of flying.

Anxious Thinking Produces Six Alterations in Consciousness

- 1. Thought-Action Fusion**
- 2. All Risks Seem Unreasonable**
- 3. Thoughts are Sticky**
- 4. Perceptual Distortions**
- 5. Intolerance of Uncertainty**
- 6. Prediction of Feared Events**

1) Thought-Action Fusion.

Ordinarily, the differences between our thoughts and actions are clear. Anxious thinking creates an altered state of consciousness where scary thoughts can feel as frightening as scary behaviors. Your thoughts and actions feel fused together.

Even though images in your mind are triggering your fears, you feel like you are living through—not just thinking about—a dangerous experience. Thought-Action fusion makes it seem that there is little difference between thinking about something and it actually happening. If you worry about losing control while on the flight, then your anxious thinking will make that thought feel like it might really happen. Thoughts no longer feel like a safe way to rehearse actions without consequences. If you worry about the plane crashing, anxious thinking makes it feel like your worries increase the probability—or might even be a cause—of a crash to occur.

2) All Risks Seem Unreasonable

In ordinary thinking, we understand that nothing in life is risk free, and we take reasonable risks in order to achieve some goal. In contrast, anxious thinking cannot

accept any risks, because thinking about something gives it a very high probability of happening. We feel like our "what if?" catastrophic thoughts are likely to occur.

So, for example, you might know in your brain that the most dangerous part of flying to Los Angeles is the drive to the airport. But you are quite willing to get in your car and drive to LaGuardia, even though you know that there is a very small risk that you will get into a fatal accident on the way. You use reasonable care when you drive, and you probably keep your car in reasonably safe condition.

But your anxious thinking about flying doesn't allow for the same sort of reasonable risk taking. When you are anxious, any risk seems unreasonable. You want a 100% guarantee that an unpleasant or disastrous experience won't occur. Your anxiety continually asks for reassurances that you are safe and demands that you avoid situations that feel dangerous. Anxious thinking makes no distinction between fears that are triggered by catastrophic images in your mind and fears that are triggered by actual danger.

3) Thoughts Are Sticky

Anxious thinking makes scary thoughts hard to avoid. They seem stuck in your mind. No matter how much you tell yourself to think of something else, your catastrophic thoughts come right back to intrude themselves into your awareness. Distractions are only partially helpful in getting your mind onto another subject, and they sometimes are no help at all.

It is like the game you might have played when you were young. Did you ever tell someone to not think about pink elephants for the next minute? Of course that is almost impossible to do. The act of trying to keep something out of our mind, keeps it in the foreground of our mind. In the same manner, our attempts to get away from anxious thoughts—keep them out of our minds—ensures that they stay. Anxiety makes our anxious thoughts feel sticky at precisely the time we would like to banish them from our awareness.

4) Perceptual Distortions

Anxiety makes our world seem different and more threatening. Anxious thinking causes us to become overly aware of our thoughts and our body. We feel overly self-conscious. Our thoughts can seem too close to us, and our body parts can feel unusual or awkward. These feelings increase your experience of alarm when you are on a plane or anticipating a flight.

Additionally, anxiety often makes us hypersensitive and hyper-aware. Sounds and other sensations can feel particularly powerful and jarring. You might experience exquisite sensitivity to your own bodily feelings, external movements, odors, colors, voice tone, and a host of other sensations that seem quite ordinary when you aren't feeling anxious. The sum total of this hyperawareness makes you feel less powerful and more vulnerable, which, in turn, adds to your overall anxiety.

Anxiety also makes you hyper-vigilant to possible threats. Your body is reacting with a “fight, flight, or freeze” stress response. Since you want to avoid your anxiety triggers, you are constantly scanning to stay away from them. Your attempts to avoid them paradoxically seek them out. It feels dangerous not to focus on what frightens you. Otherwise, emergencies might blindsides you. So the awareness of threats and dangers stay centered in your awareness.

On the plane, your anxiety pushes you to remain hyper-vigilant to mechanical malfunctions, turbulence, unusual sounds and threatening passengers. Your perceptual distortions keep you firmly in the grasp of the anxiety loop.

5) Intolerance of Uncertainty

Life has uncertainties. No one can predict the future. This is a fact of our ordinary life. In most activities, we assume that our future will be like the past. We learn to fill in the gaps of uncertainty with our own experiences. We accept that nothing in life is entirely risk free.

But anxiety makes uncertainty feel threatening. Uncertainty becomes linked with the possibility of disaster. Even more disturbing, anxious thinking makes thoughts feel frightening. Even the most unlikely situation can feel as if it has a high probability of occurring. So any uncertainty with regard to flying can feel extremely dangerous. Our imagined catastrophic scenarios feel like they are likely to occur.

6) Feared Thoughts Become Predictive

One of the most distressing aspects of anxious thinking is that feared thoughts feel like they predict future events. Your anxious thoughts about flying makes you believe that something awful will happen if you do fly. As a consequence, you want to wait until your anxiety subsides before you try to overcome your fears, which only serves to increase their intensity. It is not uncommon for fearful fliers to tell me that they will be ready to fly when their anxiety about the flight goes down. For them, increased anxiety predicts a catastrophic event, while lowered anxiety predicts a safer flight.

The problem, of course, is that the only reliable way to lower anxiety is to expose yourself to your triggers in manageable steps, feel the fear, and allow your brain and your body to gradually calm down. Rather than waiting for your fear to go away before you fly, your goal is to fly with fear, and learn to be less afraid of the fear symptoms themselves.

Common Sense Makes No Sense: Anxiety Out-Smarts Common Sense

Common sense tells us that the best course is to use our gut feelings to guide our actions. But this is not always true, and it is **never** true when dealing with your fear of flying. Anxiety is an excellent trickster and bluffer, and it will tell you that you are in danger when you are perfectly safe. Remember a basic truth: anxiety is reinforced by avoidance.

Your gut feelings from anxiety will always tell you to avoid. If you follow your gut feelings, you will always be reinforcing your anxiety.

Why Anxiety is So Good at Bluffing Common Sense

Here is why anxiety can bluff common sense so well: Anxiety triggers your autonomic nervous system so that you feel terrified. The terror you feel when you are experiencing anxiety is identical to the terror you feel when you are in objective danger. Both your physiological reactions and your bodily sensations are exactly the same. As a result, your feelings are of no help at all in determining when you are in danger from when you are in the midst of an anxiety attack. You cannot use your feelings to help you make that distinction.

Anxiety makes you think that you are in danger when you are not. This is particularly true when you are on an airplane, and focusing on the various elements of flight that seem potentially dangerous. But don't forget that your job is to remind yourself that you are feeling anxiety—to choose that your fears come from anxiety rather than danger. Once you make that choice, your best approach is to take a paradoxical approach.

You Can Out-Smart Anxiety: The Paradoxical Attitude or the Rule of Opposites

Your goal is to learn not to follow what anxiety tells you to do. Anxiety is not a true feeling. Think of it as a *pseudo-emotion*. Remember that anxiety makes you feel like that are in danger when you are not. As a rule, your best course of behavior is to do the **opposite** of what your anxious feelings are telling you to do. Be paradoxical. Do the opposite of what anxiety wants you to do. **Fight** what anxiety is telling you to do, but **embrace** the feelings and discomfort that anxiety engenders.

If your anxiety is telling you to stay in your seat and grip the armrests, then open your hands (and your mouth!), get up, and move around. If you feel so anxious you need to walk around, try to stay planted in your seat. Outsmart anxiety by taking a paradoxical approach.

Here is what you want to remember: **Fight** the behavior that your anxiety is telling you to do, but **accept** and **allow** the anxious feelings. This is the paradoxical approach.

The Eight Paradoxes for Successfully Coping With Anxiety

1. When dealing with anxiety, do not trust your feelings. Anxiety is a great bluffer and will tell you that you are in danger during your flight, when you are perfectly safe.
2. When confronting anxiety, less is more. The best thing to do when you are feeling anxiety is also the hardest thing to do: Do nothing. Any attempt to push away or fight your anxiety will only add to its intensity.

3. Attempts to avoid anxiety make it stronger. The temporary relief you feel when you avoid is actually reinforcing and empowering your fear.
4. The energy used to fight anxiety adds to its intensity. Anxiety is a complicated reaction, but certainly we know that tension is an essential aspect of it. When you tense up to fight anxiety, you are increasing the tension that is already there. Your anxiety goes up.
5. Short-term anxiety reduction leads to long-term anxiety increase. The only way to reduce anxiety in the short term is to avoid it in some way. But in the long term, avoidance reinforces the anxiety.
6. Reduction of anxiety in the future requires an acceptance of increased anxiety in the present. It may not be realistic to expect yourself to fly comfortably right away. In fact, flying more regularly might increase your anxiety for a while.
7. Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly. Both perfectionism and the unwillingness to allow the feelings of awkwardness that accompany new activities increase anxiety.
8. Resisting anxiety leads to increased persistence of anxiety. We are starting with your fear of flying. The more you are able to accept your fear reaction without engaging it, the more quickly it will start to subside.