
INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

“Fight or flight” and relaxed breathing

It is natural to be worried when you are physically unwell. It is also very common to feel anxious and fearful. These feelings may be with you all the time, or they may come and go quite suddenly.

It is useful to understand what anxiety is and why it happens, because then you can find ways to manage it.

Anxiety is a normal, healthy reaction (the “fight or flight” reaction) which prepares our bodies for action. The “fight or flight” reaction was very useful in the past, when our ancestors lived in caves and were threatened by wild animals. The reaction prepared them for running or fighting. We still possess this survival reaction and it can be useful when we need to act quickly, for example, getting out of the way of a speeding car.

However, this reaction can also be triggered by worrying thoughts or images - threats to our physical or psychological well being. For example, imagining bad news when we go for test results, or worrying about how we will manage to do all the household chores while physically unwell. These threats cannot be solved by running away or fighting. The “fight or flight” reaction will not be useful in these situations. It will simply make us feel even worse.

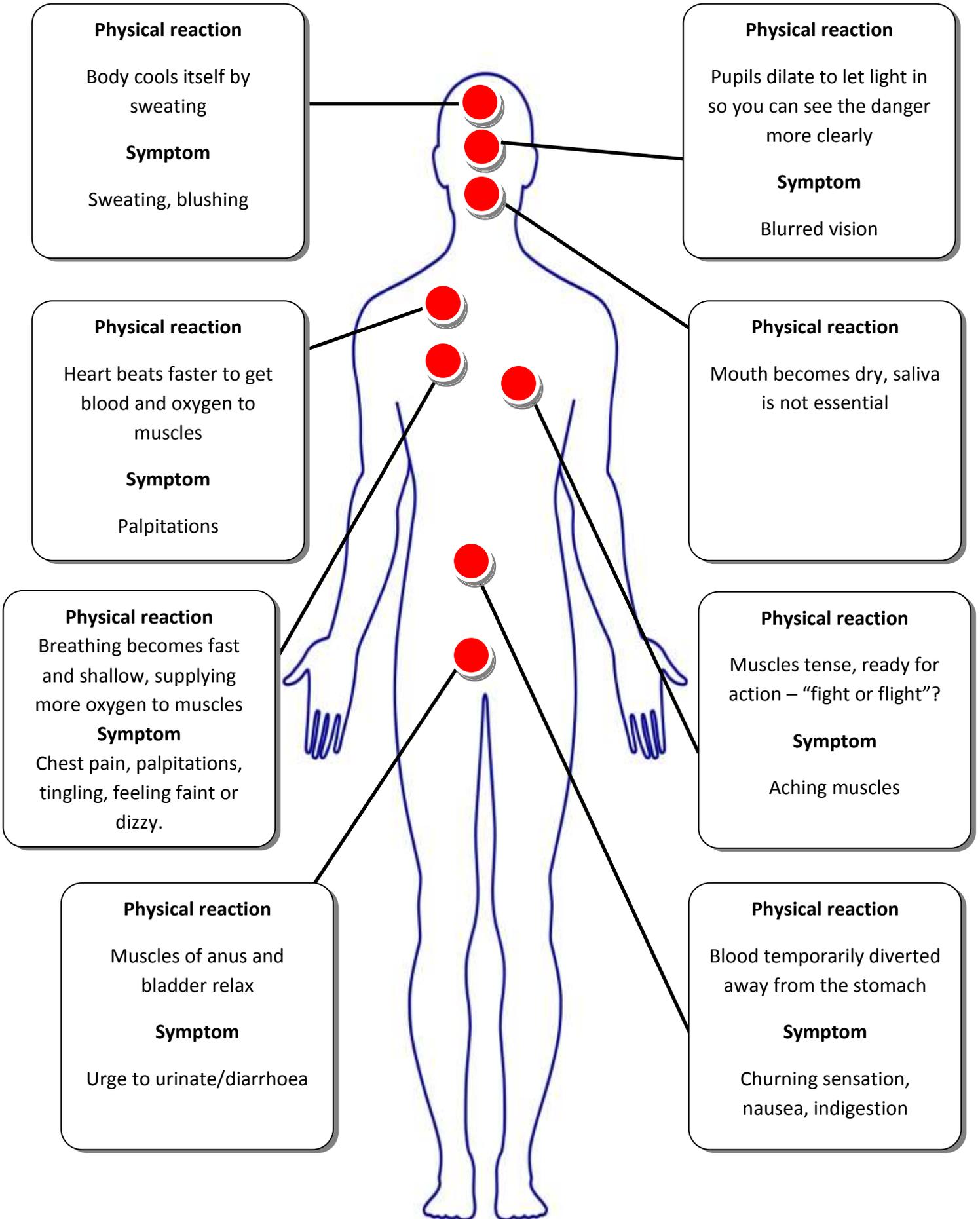
Anxiety (“fight or flight”) becomes a problem when it impacts on everyday life or prevents you from doing things you need or wish to do. There are techniques you can learn to manage these symptoms, but first you need to understand what is happening to your body when you feel anxious.

The “fight or flight” reaction has physical effects on the body, starting with adrenalin being released into the blood stream. This makes a number of changes to your body to prepare it for action. The physical changes and the symptoms they cause can be seen in the diagram on the next page.

REMEMBER, THESE FEELINGS ARE UNPLEASANT, BUT ARE NOT HARMFUL!

When “fight or flight” symptoms occur in situations which do not require us to run or fight, we need to recognise what is happening to our bodies and manage the symptoms. This in turn will help us to feel more in control of the situation.

The Fight or Flight Response



A simple way to overcome the symptoms of “fight or flight” is to use relaxed breathing. The “fight or flight” reaction makes our breathing shallow and rapid to increase oxygen, making our bodies ready for action. If we do not use this extra oxygen by running or fighting, there is temporarily an imbalance in the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide in our blood. This imbalance causes many of the symptoms of anxiety. Relaxed breathing helps by slowing down our breathing, rebalancing the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

Relaxed breathing can also prevent stress building up in the first place. It is quick and easy to do and you can do it anywhere.

To learn relaxed breathing....

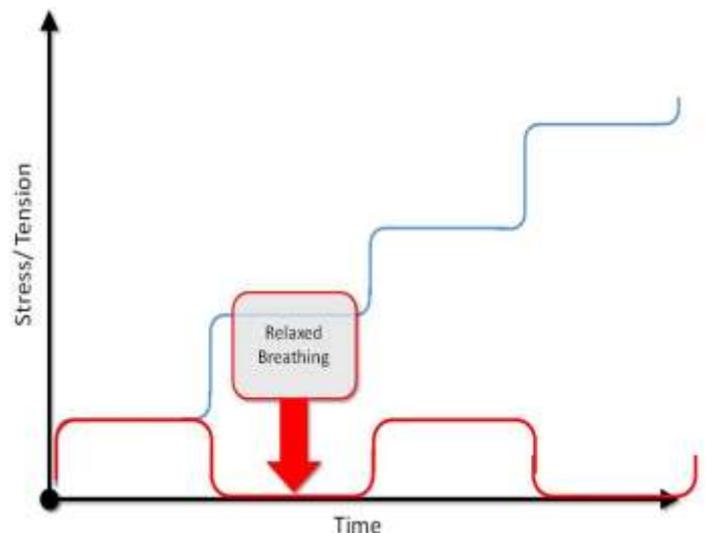
1. Place one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach just below your ribs.
2. Count “1,000, 2,000, 3,000 in” as you breathe in through your nose. As you gently breathe in through your nose, allow your stomach to rise. Your chest will stay fairly still. Keep the movement gentle.
3. Count “1,000, 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 out”, as you breathe out through your mouth slowly and evenly. Feel your stomach sinking. As you breathe out, say a word or phrase to yourself which helps you to relax, for example “relax” or “let it go”.
4. Breathe at a pace which feels natural for you. Again, be aware of your hand on your stomach rising, while the hand on your upper chest hardly moves.

5. Once you have mastered the technique of relaxed breathing, you can continue without placing your hands on your chest and stomach.

A pattern for relaxed breathing

It is important to practise this exercise often at first. Relaxation is a skill which has to be learned, just like playing a musical instrument or riding a bike.

1. Two or three breaths every hour or so each day is ideal.
2. Use relaxed breathing to prevent the build up of stress on a regular basis **before** you are aware of being stressed. The diagram below shows how relaxed breathing at regular intervals can stop stress building and prevent the fight or flight reaction.



3. Try to match the relaxed breathing exercises with your normal routine so it becomes easy to remember to do it. For instance, every time you have a drink, go to the toilet, or the adverts come on TV.

If your watch or phone has an alarm, you could set it to remind you at regular intervals.

4. Do not worry if you find this exercise difficult at first. You may find your mind wanders off onto other thoughts. It is ok to notice other thoughts are there. Just stay positive and bring your attention gently back to the relaxation when you are ready. Most people find that with practise, they are able to increase the time they can stay focussed on being relaxed.
5. If you experience intense symptoms of the “fight or flight” reaction (a panic attack) and this technique does not relieve the symptoms after a few minutes, it is most likely you did not catch it quickly enough and you will need to use the re-breathing technique. This simply means breathing in the air you have just breathed out. This can be easily and quickly achieved using a small paper bag (do not use a plastic one), or by cupping your hands over your nose and mouth. Do four or five relaxed breaths, as in the relaxed breathing exercise.
6. Relaxed breathing is important to learn because it works quickly, keeps stress levels in check and you can do it anywhere.

Further sources of information

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them. Stating a web address does not imply we endorse a particular site. Neither does not stating a web address imply lack of endorsement.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

The PALS team is available to help with any of your comments, compliments or concerns and will ensure a prompt and efficient service. Contact details:

- King’s Mill Hospital **01623 672222**
(out of hours answer phone)
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- Newark Hospital **01636 685692**
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If you need this information in a different language or format, please contact PALS, as above.

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