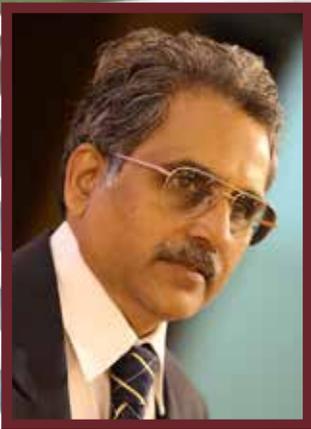


## GUEST COLUMN

# Are you just Worried, Afraid, Or Anxious?



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Both worry and anxiety are a set of responses to an unknown, imprecise or ill defined threat; often anticipatory in nature and created by the imagination. You're worried about something. You obsess about it for hours every day, maybe for weeks. How do you know whether this is typical worrying, a normal way of processing something that's important to you, or if you have an anxiety disorder? The word 'anxiety' has been derived from the Latin word 'anxiētātem', meaning "distressed or troubled."

**Anxiety** is that an uneasy feeling, or apprehension, in response to a stressor such as an exam or an interview, or to a perceived threat or danger. It is often produced by anticipating future events. Anxiety is like being on 'yellow alert'; It is an attempt to stay safe – a survival tactic – by foreseeing and planning for every conceivable outcome of a possible danger. It often centres on trying to find certainty in uncertain situations. Anxiety as a feeling is different from anxiety as a disorder. You can feel anxious and not have an anxiety disorder. And anxiety can be a symptom of other psychiatric disorders as well.

Both worry and anxiety are a set of responses to an unknown, imprecise or ill defined threat; often anticipatory in nature and created by the imagination. Worry is more associated with the need to be prepared. As

we saw earlier (The Health Planters issue No. 7), worry can be useful in helping to find solutions to problems; however, anxiety often centres on problems that cannot currently be solved. Worry can also lead to feeling anxious.

**Fear** is an unpleasant emotion caused by the perceived threat of danger, pain, or harm. It is like stepping up a level to 'orange alert'; fear is one stage away from panic. The intensity of the fear depends upon the seriousness or unpleasantness of the threat and how far into the future it is. Fear is intended for short term survival not long term existence. This state of readiness means the body can quickly step up to the full panic response if events deem it necessary. However fear can be experienced for prolonged periods when it's due to thoughts (and not a real situation) experienced due to an anxiety disorder, depression, or psychosis.

**Panic** is an extension of fear, but in an extreme form; feeling totally overwhelmed by the physical and mental feelings of it. It happens when faced with sudden life threatening danger at this very moment now. The panic response – 'red alert' – is vital in this situation because it gets the body instantly into the optimum state for survival; getting ready to fight or flee, or sometimes even freeze. In a truly dangerous situation the physical effects of panic are put to good use fighting or

fleeing, and the person would be focusing on doing just that; not thinking about how they were feeling. It's only when panic strikes for no apparent reason, that a person has chance to become aware of its many physical sensations. Panic experienced in the absence of any real danger or life threatening situation, is a mental disorder that requires to be treated.

In small doses, anxiety is healthy and useful, as it makes one alert and able to deal with the stressor. Usually when the stressor is removed or it is dealt with, the anxiety ends. There are various types of anxiety including existential anxiety, test and performance anxiety, stranger and social anxiety, choice or decision anxiety and paradoxical anxiety.

**Existential Anxiety** refers to a sense of worry, dread or panic that may arise from the contemplation of life's biggest questions, such as "Who am I?" or "Why am I here?". People also feel realistic anxiety about world dangers, such as the possibility of war, and about social and economic changes that may affect their livelihood or way of life. Existential perspectives in philosophy and psychology contend that this contemplation leads inevitably to the realization that everyone has the freedom and responsibility to find meaning in life. Although this realization is inherently distressing, many existential thinkers view this form of anxiety as healthy and productive.

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**Performance Anxiety** is a combination of physiological over-arousal, and tension along with worry, dread, fear of failure, and catastrophizing, and, sometimes physical symptoms such as “butterflies in the stomach”, a stomach ache, headache, or urge to go to the toilet which may be aroused in an individual by the requirement to perform in front of an audience, whether actually or potentially.

**Test Anxiety** is a form of performance anxiety that results due to test situations or exams. It's pretty normal to feel a little nervous and stressed before a test. Just about everyone does. And a touch of nervous anticipation can actually help you get revved and keep you at peak performance while you're taking the test. But for some people, this normal anxiety is more intense. The nervousness they feel before a test can be so strong that it interferes with their concentration or performance. Test anxiety is not the same as doing poorly on a certain test because your mind is on something else. Most people know that having other things on their minds — such as conflict at home or the death of someone close — can also interfere with their concentration and prevent them from doing their best on a test.

**Social Anxiety** is a discomfort or a fear when a person is in a social interaction that involves a concern of being judged or evaluated by others.

**Decision Anxiety** is induced by the need to choose between similar options and is increasingly being recognized as a problem for individuals and for organizations.

When a person experiences unpleasant feelings when confronted with specific situations, demands or a particular object or event, it is known as “State Anxiety”. State anxiety arises when the person makes a mental assessment of some type of threat. When the object or situation that is perceived as threatening goes away, the person no longer experiences anxiety. Thus, state anxiety refers to a temporary condition in response to some perceived threat.

However some people have a tendency to experience anxiety in anticipation of a threat even when the specific situation begins or after it is over. This is known as “Trait Anxiety”. People with a high level of trait anxiety experience more intense degrees of state anxiety to specific situations than most people do, and experience anxiety toward a broader range of situations or objects than most people. Thus,

trait anxiety is a personality characteristic, while state anxiety is a situational response. Major life changes may bring on state anxiety. These can include starting a new job or school, moving away, an upcoming marriage, having children, break-ups or divorce etc.

Anxiety produces a faster heart rate, rapid breathing, cold sweat, and subtle changes within the body, including: Jumpiness and feeling on edge; Heightened senses (looking out for danger); Muscle tension (just in case physical action is required). This approach serves us well when faced with a real potential threat.

To the primeval caveman it was wise to assume the rustling in the bushes might be a hungry beast. If it turned out to be a gust of wind, nothing was lost. However, when trying to evaluate a future situation in the mind, things become more nebulous. Forecasting disaster scenarios leads to feeling apprehensive and fearful. Although very unlikely to happen, a person starts to imagine what those disasters would be like. Remember, the mind cannot tell the difference between reality and a vividly imagined thought, so they start to experience fear.

Anxiety is usually prompted by fear. Fear is a warning system built into our bodies as a natural reaction to danger. It is healthy to feel fear when real danger is present. But when fear goes beyond real danger and lingers in our minds, it becomes an anxiety disorder, a condition that requires to be treated.

Anxiety becomes a disorder when the symptoms occur without any obvious triggering stressor, and interfere with our daily lives and our ability to function. People suffering from anxiety often report the following symptoms: Muscle tension, lump in the throat, palpitations, skipped heartbeats, excessive sweating, nausea, trembling and dizziness. fearfulness or confusion, inability to relax, difficulty in concentrating, constant rumination on the fear, shortness of breath, upset stomach, trembling, twitching, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, sweating, or hot flashes, nausea or having to go to the bathroom frequently, inability to relax, tendency to feel tired, trouble falling or staying asleep, and the tendency to startle more easily than other people. If the anxiety worsens, the symptoms may also include loose stools, frequent urination, dry mouth and problems swallowing. These symptoms are caused when your body releases the hormone adrenaline, in re-

sponse to the stress. These symptoms are severe, upsetting, and make the individual feel extremely uncomfortable, out of control and helpless.

Anxiety disorders fall into a set of separate diagnoses, depending upon the symptoms and severity of the anxiety the person experiences. The anxiety disorders that will be discussed in this series are:

- ☛ Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- ☛ Social Anxiety Disorder (also known as social phobia)
- ☛ Panic Disorder (including panic attacks)
- ☛ Specific phobias (also known as simple phobias)

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** is more than the normal anxiety people experience in day to day life. It is chronic and exaggerated worry and tension, even though nothing seems to provoke it. Having this disorder means always anticipating disaster, often worrying excessively about health, money, family, or work, though, the source of the worry is hard to pinpoint. Simply the thought of getting through the day provokes anxiety.

People with GAD can't seem to shake their concerns, even though they usually realize that their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants — that it's irrational.

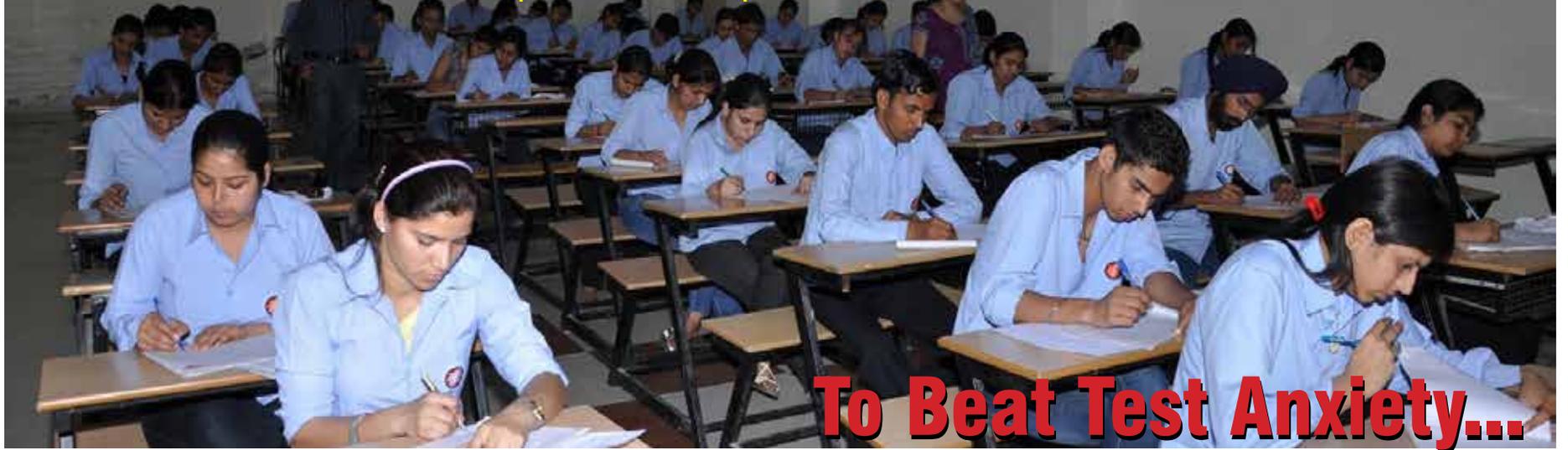
Usually the impairment associated with GAD is mild and people with the disorder don't feel too restricted in social settings or on the job. Unlike many other anxiety disorders, people with GAD don't characteristically avoid certain situations as a result of their disorder. However, if severe, GAD can be very debilitating, making it difficult to carry out even the most ordinary daily activities.

Treatment for GAD is varied and a number of approaches work equally well. Typically the most effective treatment will be an approach which incorporates medicines, relaxation therapy and psychotherapy or counselling. Psychotherapy and relaxation techniques can't be worked on effectively if the individual is overwhelmed by anxiety or cannot concentrate and therefore medicines may need to be prescribed and to take effect before other treatments can be undertaken.

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Exams have started and the students are busy preparing for their examinations, be it public or annual. Despite putting best efforts some students are anxious and jittery, while some are mentally prepared. Prof. Dr. U. Gauthamadas, assesses the situation and provides valuable tips to overcome exam blues.



## To Beat Test Anxiety...

People who worry a lot or who are perfectionists are more likely to have trouble with test anxiety. People with these traits sometimes find it hard to accept mistakes they might make or to get anything less than a perfect score. In this way, even without meaning to, they might really pressure themselves. Test anxiety is bound to thrive in a situation like this.

Students who are not prepared for tests but who care about doing well are also likely to experience test anxiety. If you know you're not prepared, you will be worried about doing poorly. People can feel unprepared for tests for several reasons: They may not have studied enough; they may find the material difficult; or perhaps they feel tired because didn't get enough sleep the night before.

Test anxiety can be a real problem if you are so stressed out over a test that you cannot get past the nervousness to focus on the test questions and do your best work. Feeling ready to meet the challenge, though, can keep test anxiety at a manageable level.

**Use a little stress to your advantage.** Stress is your body's warning mechanism — it's a signal that helps you prepare for something important that's about to happen. So use it to your advantage. Instead of reacting to the stress by dreading, complaining, or fretting about the test with friends, take an active approach. Let stress remind you to study well in advance of a test. Chances are, you'll keep your stress from spinning out of control. After all, nobody ever feels stressed out by thoughts that they might do well on a test.

**Ask for help.** Although a little test anxiety

can be a good thing, an overdose of it is another story entirely. If sitting for a test gets you so stressed out that your mind goes blank and causes you to miss answers that you know, then your level of test anxiety probably needs some attention. Your teacher, your school guidance counsellor, or a tutor can be useful resources to talk to if you always get extreme test anxiety. Sometimes parents, who understand, can be helpful. However, if the parents themselves are worried about your performance, as they most often are in India, it may be a bad idea to turn to them.

**Be Prepared.** Some students think that going to class is all it should take to learn and do well on tests. But there's much more to learning than just hoping to soak everything up in class. That's why good study habits and learning skills (which we shall deal with in a subsequent issue) are so important — and why no amount of cramming or studying the night before a test can take the place of the deeper level of learning that happens over time with regular study. Unfortunately, the education system in India gives short shrift to developing healthy learning skills and study habits. Many students find that their test anxiety is reduced when they employ proper learning skills, or to study more regularly. It makes sense — the more you know the material, the more confident you will feel. Having confidence going into a test means you expect to do well. When you expect to do well, you will be able to relax into a test after the normal first-moment jitters pass.

**Watch what you're thinking.** If expecting to do well on a test can help you relax, what about when people expect they won't do well? Watch out for any negative messages you might be sending yourself about the

test. They can contribute to your anxiety. If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts ("I'm never any good at taking tests" or "It's going to be terrible if I do badly on this test"), replace them with positive messages. Not unrealistic positive messages, of course, but ones that are practical and true, such as "I've studied hard and I know the material, so I'm ready to do the best I can." (Of course, if you haven't studied, this message won't help!).

**Accept mistakes.** Another thing you can do is to learn to keep mistakes in perspective — especially if you're a perfectionist or you tend to be hard on yourself. Everyone makes mistakes, and you may have even heard teachers or coaches refer to mistakes as "learning opportunities." Learning to tolerate small failures and mistakes — like that one problem you got wrong in the math quiz — is a valuable skill.

**Take care of yourself.** It can help to learn ways to calm yourself down and get centred when you're tense or anxious. For some people, this might mean learning a simple breathing exercise. Practicing breathing exercises regularly (when you're not stressed out) helps your body see these exercises as a signal to relax. And, of course, taking care of your health — such as getting enough sleep, exercise, and healthy eats before a test — can help keep your mind working at its best.

Everything takes time and practice, and learning to beat test anxiety is no different. Although it won't go away overnight, facing and dealing with test anxiety will help you learn stress management, which can prove to be a valuable skill in many situations besides taking tests.