

The Fight / Flight Response

This leaflet explains how the body reacts to a threat, whether real or imagined, and how it can become a problem when it happens too often in situations that are not really dangerous and when you feel unable to cope with its effects.



Think about a time when you have had a sudden shock – perhaps you have stepped into the road when a car was coming and didn't realise until you heard the car horn. This is when your 'fight/flight' response kicks in automatically to save you from a dangerous or threatening situation. Your body releases Adrenaline, which immediately affects most of your body functions. Your heart rate and breathing both speed up so that blood is pumped faster round the body to your muscles, which can then be used to fight or to run away. There may be other physical responses such as feeling sweaty or restless and tense. Your mouth may go dry, you may find it hard to swallow; you may tremble or get 'jelly legs'. Your stomach may churn; you may feel sick or faint or want to go to the toilet. Does any of this sound familiar to you? Can you remember the last time that you felt like this?

All of these reactions are meant to help you get away from the threat and, once the danger has passed, your body quickly returns to normal. The 'fight / flight' response is a very useful response when the danger is real, but not at all useful if the danger is not in the 'here and now' or if the danger is far less than you think it is.

Our bodies react to extreme and unhelpful frightening thoughts just as it would to a physical danger – adrenaline cannot tell the difference between a real threat and an imagined or exaggerated threat. You may be reacting to anxious thoughts about the future or frightening memories from the past, but your fight/flight response doesn't know that the danger is not in the present – it just 'kicks in' and creates some or all of the responses described above.

Sometimes the responses themselves can be frightening, or go on for too long, for example when rapid breathing continues long enough to cause a state of anxious over-breathing – also known as *hyperventilation*. (There is a separate leaflet entitled '*relaxed breathing*'). Worse still, you may then get frightened by your fight / flight response and its effects on your body and set up a 'vicious cycle' of anxious thoughts, feelings and behaviour that can result in a panic attack (there is a separate leaflet on '*panic attacks*').

The fight or flight response causes you to pay particular attention to any potential threats around you. Each individual will focus on different threats that are especially scary for them. For example, the experience of a very rapid heart or chest pain in panic may reinforce fears that "*I'm having a heart attack*". Feelings of dizziness and blurred vision caused by over breathing can reinforce fears that "*I am about to faint/collapse*" or that "*I'm having a stroke*". It is also important to know that over-breathing with rapid shallow breaths strangely actually causes us to feel even more breathless.

It is important to recognise that although these sensations are unpleasant, **THEY ARE NOT HARMFUL**. It is your body's inbuilt defence mechanism that is being triggered and it is designed to save your life, not to threaten it.

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So, while these sensations can be very uncomfortable and unpleasant, they cannot kill you, make you go mad or make you do things that you don't want to do – and the sensations will pass in time without you having to do anything, although your guide can give you other leaflets which will explain how you can modify your fight / flight response to make it less uncomfortable and last for less time in situations where it is not needed.

Your guide can help you to find out if you are triggering your 'fight / flight' response when you don't really need it. You might start keeping a diary showing when your fight / flight response kicks in, what set it off and what happened afterwards, to bring back and discuss with your guide next time.

Ask them for a '*Diary Sheet*' to help you keep a record.

Related leaflets include:

- > Physical effects of Anxiety
- > Anxiety – A 5 Areas Model
- > Panic Attacks

- > Relaxation
- > Relaxed Breathing
- > Overcoming Hyperventilation

