

Anxiety: Nature versus Nurture

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It is not clear why some of us are more prone to worry or anxiety; and honestly researchers still do not agree on the causes. For a long time, researchers and scholars debated back and forth about nature vs. nurture; you have probably read about this in a science class! What we do know today is that anxiety probably is the result of a mixture of both nature and nurture.

Whatever the combination is for you, it is important to know that all of us experience anxiety at some point in our lives, and with good reason. Recent world events not only trigger anxiety but worsen the symptoms in those who are already genetically disposed.

Anxiety serves an evolutionary purpose as it is our internal “alarm” system to help keep us safe. Fight, Flight or Freeze are natural responses to situations that our system might interpret as unsafe. When the alarm sounds, our bodies react physiologically. Often we experience anxiety first in our physical body and then in our minds. Physical signs can be an early warning that anxiety is coming, so getting to know your body and what it is trying to tell you is essential in managing stress. Understanding these signs is one step toward a mindful lifestyle.

Below are two lists. One list contains physical signs of anxiety that occur in many people. You also may experience something outside of this list and, if so, go ahead and add it in. The second list is common situations that often create anxiety in people. Look at both lists and see if you can remember a time when a sign matched up with a situation. In other words, did you ever experience sweaty palms and a racing heart before you presented in front of a group? Have you ever gotten a stomach ache before you took an important exam?

Signs

Headache
Stomach ache
Sweaty palms
Heart racing
Butterflies in the stomach
Dry mouth
Flushed or red cheeks
Breathing changes (either constricted or fast)
Light headedness
Pounding heart
Quavering voice
Shaky hands
Muscle tension

Situation

Public speaking
Grades
Exam
Problems at home with family
Going to school/college
Argument with friends
Talking to teachers or adults
Social situations
Performing in public (sports, music, etc.)
Dating
Trying out for a team or activity
Parties
Traveling/vacationing away from home

When you know the signs of anxiety, you are more prepared to manage them and decrease the amount of stress and anxiety you might feel. Remember, anxiety is often hardest to manage when it comes on unexpectedly; so knowing the signs and situations that trigger the anxiety is half the work of managing it. The more you know yourself, the better off you will be, and you will be able to figure out what coping skills work best for you in stressful situations.