

## **UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY: ADJUSTING YOUR ALARM SYSTEM**

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### **Anxiety: Your Personal Alarm System**

Anxiety can be your friend. That may sound like an odd statement. If you're reading this, it's probably because anxiety is a problem in your life.

One expert on anxiety, Dr. David Barlow, has described anxiety as your body's alarm system, and I think that's an excellent way of understanding what anxiety is. We need a way of knowing when there is a threat in our environment, and mobilizing to deal with the threat. Your body's brain and nervous system are designed to do just that. When there is a perception of danger, real or imagined, your nervous system kicks into gear. Your body releases chemicals and hormones that cause changes in your heart rate, breathing and other physical processes, all in order to prepare you to face the danger. Also, your brain works to narrow your attention so that you are focusing intently on the problem at hand. When these changes occur, we experience anxiety. When a threat is present, your experience of anxiety is appropriate, necessary, helpful and possibly life-saving. Your alarm system has been activated, and your body and mind have become mobilized to deal with the immediate threat.

### **False and Exaggerated Alarms**

Problems with anxiety occur when your alarm system is not functioning properly. Some people may be more prone to experience anxiety and are born with highly sensitive nervous systems that are activated easily. Other people develop problems with the activation of the body's nervous system because of experiences they have had. You may perceive a threat when there is none. For example, if a veteran with combat experience hears a loud truck drive by, he may have a full-fledged fight or flight response. His alarm system may become activated as if he was in a life-threatening situation. This is the equivalent of a false alarm. The body's alarm system has been triggered when there is no actual threat present.

Or, there may be some level of threat or possibility of danger, but you react as if the level of danger is much higher than it actually is. The truth is that we all face threats and dangers in our lives. Living involves taking risks. By pursuing our goals and by engaging in our daily activities and relationships, we face threats of failure and loss of our self-esteem or sense of well-being. Also, there are threats to our safety and health in our environment, although the risk is generally mild or remote in everyday kinds of activities. When you are experiencing ongoing problems with anxiety, your anxiety reactions may be false alarms, or your alarms may be going off stronger or louder than they need to be in a given situation.

### **The Five Alarm Approach to Managing Anxiety**

Fire departments have a way of classifying how severe a fire emergency is. A one-alarm fire is one that calls for one unit to respond. That may be one fire truck or one fire station, depending on the way a given department operates. A two-alarm fire is one that is larger and requires additional resources, and so forth up to five alarms. The higher the alarm level, the more serious and dangerous the situation is.

You can think of your own anxiety response in the same terms. The key to anxiety management is to match the alarm level and your response to the real level of threat you are facing. For example, let's say that Sierra needs to give a presentation in front of her psychology class of 75 people. She has been unable to sleep, starts hyperventilating when she thinks about the presentation, and feels overwhelmed much of the time, to the point that it interferes with her ability to study and perform well at work. Is danger present in this situation? Some people would not find public speaking threatening and would not experience anxiety. Most people who are not used to talking in front of large groups would probably find it somewhat uncomfortable and experience some anxiety. Sierra may experience fear of being ridiculed, embarrassed, or getting a lower grade in the class if her presentation does not go well. What's the appropriate alarm level for these threats? That is something for each person to determine for themselves. Sierra may be able to determine that this is a 1 ½ alarm situation, but her alarm system is going off, and so she is responding, as if it is a four-alarm situation. This knowledge by itself may or may not help reduce her anxiety. But it can give her the opportunity to use a number of strategies to adjust the alarm, and her response, to a more manageable and appropriate level.

## How Anxiety Is Experienced

Anxiety comes in a number of different forms. The following descriptions (adapted from the DSM – 5) explain some of the most common ways anxiety is experienced and expressed. Each of them can be experienced on a continuum from mild to severe.

**Panic:** sudden onset of apprehension, fearfulness or terror, often associated with feelings of impending doom. Physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, chest pain, dizziness and sweating are often present.

**Agoraphobia:** anxiety about, or avoidance of, places or situations from which escape may be difficult.

**Specific phobia:** fear or avoidance of a specific object or situation

**Generalized anxiety:** persistent and excessive worry

**Obsessive – compulsive anxiety:** recurrent obsessions (thoughts or impulses that are experienced as intrusive and inappropriate) or compulsions (repetitive behaviors or mental acts used as a way of reducing or preventing distress)

**Posttraumatic stress or acute stress** – reexperiencing of a traumatic event, accompanied by fear and panic-like physical symptoms.

## Managing Anxiety: Getting Started

I have developed the five-alarm model and exercises as a general way of managing all kinds of anxiety. The attached form can serve as an initial exercise, and you may find that this exercise is all you need to reduce your anxiety to an appropriate level. However, each type of anxiety is different, and there are specific and very effective strategies and counseling techniques that have been developed for each type of anxiety. Also, there are complete workbooks available that have exercises geared toward each type of anxiety (available through the Lakeland Library) if you find that the five-alarm model does not meet your needs and if you are able to put in some extra time and effort.

# Five-Alarm Anxiety Monitoring Form

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Situation: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Alarm level experienced (on a scale of 1-5): \_\_\_\_\_

What is the threat that is present? \_\_\_\_\_  
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What would be an appropriate alarm level, given the realistic threat that is present (on a scale of 1-5)? \_\_\_\_\_

What do I want to try to remind myself of in this situation to help me manage my response? What can I do to match my alarm reaction with the appropriate alarm level?

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What alarm level am I able to achieve as a result of this exercise (on a scale of 1-5)? \_\_\_\_\_

