

## Being Afraid About Things...

Have you ever been afraid? Everyone has been scared at some time. Does a thunder and lightning storm make your heart beat fast? Maybe your mouth goes dry when your teacher announces a pop quiz, or your palms sweat when it's your turn to give your book report in front of the class. Perhaps you get butterflies in your stomach when you see the bully that picks on you.

### Everyday Worries

We all have fears from time to time. That's true no matter how big we are or brave we can be. Fear can even be good for you sometimes and even help you stay healthy. Fear of walking near the edge of a high wall can keep you from falling; fear of getting too close to a campfire may save you from suffering a bad burn; and fear of getting a bad grade on a test may make you study more. Being a bit on edge can also sharpen your senses and help you perform better in a recital or during a track meet. Some people even enjoy being a little scared. That's why they like to watch scary movies - or go on roller coaster rides.

### What Happens When You're Scared?

Have you ever wondered why being scared makes your heart beat faster and makes you breathe quicker? The body's reaction to fear is called the "fight or flight" response. And people have had it since the beginning of time.

Here's how it works. Imagine you're a caveman (or cavewoman) alive 100,000 years ago - and you come face to face with a hungry saber-toothed tiger. You have two choices: 1) Run for it (that's flight). Or 2) Pick up your club and battle with the tiger (that's fight). A final choice (be eaten) doesn't seem like such a good one.

Today, you can apply fight or flight to that bully who confronts you and won't listen to reason. You have two choices: 1) Turn and walk away (flight). Or 2) Fight, even though he's bigger and you know fighting won't solve the problem.

To prepare for fight or flight, your body does a number of things automatically so it's ready for quick action or a quick escape. Your heart rate increases to pump more blood to your muscles and brain, your lungs breathe faster to supply your body with oxygen, your eyes' pupils get larger to see better, and your digestive and urinary systems slow down for the moment so you can concentrate on more important things, like getting out of the situation in one piece!

### What Is Anxiety?

Usually, our bodies only go into fight or flight when there is something to fear. However, sometimes this occurs when there doesn't seem to be anything to be frightened about. When you feel scared but there doesn't seem to be a clear reason, that's called **anxiety**

There might be other funny feelings that come along with anxiety - like a feeling of tightness in your chest, a bellyache, dizziness, or a sense that something horrible is going to happen. Sometimes anxiety can interfere with things you need to do, like learning and

sleeping. For some kids, feelings of anxiety or worry can happen anytime - for others they might occur only at certain times, like when they are leaving their home or family to go somewhere. In some people, this feeling of anxiety occurs almost all the time and gets in the way of doing what they want to do.

Some kids may have a phobia, which is a special type of fear. When a person is especially fearful of something specific, like being in a high space, getting dirty, the number 13, or any of hundreds of specific fears, that's a phobia.

### **Why Do People Have Anxiety?**

Anxiety can happen for many reasons, but sometimes, the reason for a person's anxiety isn't clear. Sometimes this problem runs in families. Or a person might develop anxieties after something terrible happens, like a car crash. Sometimes certain medical illnesses can cause feelings of anxiety. So can abusing alcohol or other drugs, like cocaine.

Another part of the explanation has to do with the different chemicals in the brain. How the chemicals in our brain's nerve cells are balanced can affect how a person feels and acts. One of these chemicals is **serotonin**. Serotonin is one of the brain chemicals that helps send information from one brain nerve cell to another. But for some people with anxieties, this brain chemical system doesn't always seem to work the way it should.

Also, some scientists think that a special area in the brain controls the fight or flight response. With anxiety, it's like having the fight or flight response stuck in the ON position - even when there is no real danger. That makes it hard to focus on everyday things.

### **Dealing With Anxiety**

It's important to know that anxiety can be treated successfully. Some fears are normal and even helpful. But too many fears and anxiety can get in the way of enjoying everyday things like learning in school, playing with a friend, or performing in a dance recital. That's when you may need help. Tell your parent if your anxiety becomes strong. They can take you to a doctor, who can help find out if a medical problem is making you feel anxiety. A therapist can help find a way to lessen the anxiety through talking, activities, relaxation exercises, or medication (or a combination of these things).

Of course, if you do come face to face with a hungry saber-toothed tiger, there's just one thing you should do . . . RUN!

Excerpted from: <http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/afraid.html>