

Handout 2.1: Common Myths About Anxiety

Myth 1: Anxiety and fear are generally interchangeable.

Fear and anxiety often trigger similar physiological responses, but they are different in terms of their origins. Anxiety is a response to a vague threat, while fear is a response to a known threat. For example, walking on a dark city street can understandably bring about anxiety because of all the unknowns lurking in the dark, whereas actual fear might occur if you saw or sensed a large man walking toward you in the dark. We need these reactions to keep us vigilant and safe.

Myth 2: Anxiety is bad for you.

We need the fight-or-flight response to survive, and thus anxiety is quite adaptive. Anxiety can be likened to a low-fuel warning light on your car's dashboard. Just as the gas light warns you that you are running close to empty and need to refuel, anxiety alerts you to issues that need attention so that you can achieve insights and emotionally refuel and thus move forward in your life.

Myth 3: It is best to avoid anxiety and not give in to it.

The more you fight anxiety, the more you will be caught in its grips. The founder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Steven Hayes, used the image of the finger trap carnival toy to demonstrate what happens when you fight anxiety rather than accept it. Only when you give up pulling and resisting will you be able to get out of the trap.

Myth 4: If you have an anxiety disorder, it is best to avoid stressful situations.

To the contrary, cognitive behavior therapists such as Aaron Beck and David Burns actually use techniques such as "flooding" and "exposure" to aid their clients in conquering anxiety. Using these techniques, we can confront our worst fears, either in reality or in their imagination. The underlying premise is that avoiding and escaping anxiety-provoking thoughts only makes them increase and gives them too much power. Contrary to popular belief and our common instinctual behaviors, avoidance of anxiety actually increases levels of anxiety.

Myth 5: Although anxiety is common, anxiety disorders are not.

Research studies, including those from the National Institute of Mental Health, have shown that anxiety disorders affect almost 1 out of 5 people at some point in their lives. Some of the most common types of anxiety disorders, affecting millions, are phobias, social phobias, social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, and panic disorder.