

Anxiety and fear – what is the difference?

Anxiety and fear are very similar to each other but have very distinct differences.

Anxiety is the apprehension or worry of a future threat. Your brain goes into panic mode but there is no REAL threat.

Fear is an emotional response to an immediate threat.

For example, a phobia is an anxiety disorder, because if even you are afraid of spiders, they do not pose any ACTUAL threat. Anxiety relates to the 'What if'.

This is brought to life in a video on the Life Noggin [channel on YouTube](#).



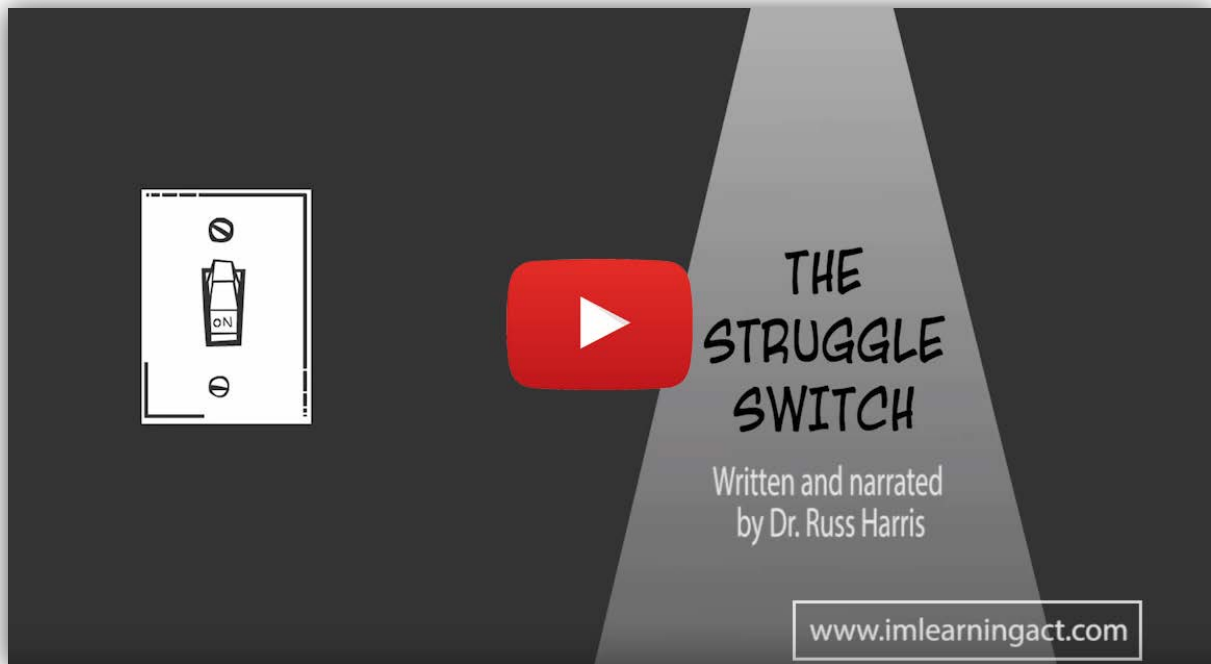
Anxiety is normal

Everyone experiences anxiety. In fact, a little anxiety can be good. It can help you focus before an important exam, or help you to prepare for an important meeting.

But if anxious thoughts are preventing you from going into the exam hall, or you cannot think straight throughout a meeting, then anxiety has become a problem - an anxiety disorder.

The struggle switch

[Dr Russ Harris](#) has made a video about 'the struggle switch', a metaphor about when anxiety overrules every day emotions, when you have anxiety about your anxiety.



The video goes on to explain the related emotions that people who struggle feel about anxiety, that they may then feel angry, sad or even guilty about feeling anxious. It becomes a difficult cycle to break when emotions are so amplified.

It is the amplification of the emotions that impacts on everyday life.

The video goes on to explain that if the struggle switch goes off, people still feel anxious but it is no longer a problem.

Fear at different ages

We are afraid of different things at different ages.

Newborns are afraid of sudden noises and older babies can be scared when they are separated from their primary caregiver/s.

Toddlers begin to be afraid of both real and imagined threats; monsters under the bed and the dark are just as scary as each other.

As children progress through primary school they will begin to be afraid of poor academic or sports performance; teenagers then beginning to worry about peer relationships as their self-esteem relies on people around them.

The biology of anxiety

When the body sees a real or imagined threat it responds biologically by entering into a state of fight, flight or freeze.

This is an evolutionary response that is seen throughout the animal kingdom – dogs begin to growl, rabbits' ears prick up, cats arch their back. Our instincts tell us something is wrong and we need to evaluate the risk before we respond.

Physically we begin to sweat, our heart rate increases, we may even become nauseas. This is driven by anxiety. However, it is only meant to be a temporary emotion.

Anxiety is made harder in the modern world as rather than encountering a tiger, today, we are facing threats such as an exam and we cannot fight taking an exam in the same way we could fight a tiger.

Different types of anxiety

- Social anxiety – fear of what people think of you, what you look like etc.
- Generalised anxiety disorder – where people don't worry about something specific but have anxiety bubbling under the surface most of the time
- Phobias
- Separation anxiety
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

What can parents or carers do to help?

- Manage their own anxiety – do not allow personal fears and phobias to influence a child
- Don't overreact and immediately take the perceived threat away
- Reward brave behaviour and any positive step forward
- Don't collude with the child – e.g. encourage the child or young person to stay away from school
- Take gradual steps to overcome the anxiety – showing pictures of dogs to a child who is frightened of dogs for example
- Give them the opportunity to show that they can cope
- Resolve maintenance factors – if bullying is fuelling anxiety about attending school, then the bullying has to be resolved before the anxiety is
- Provide downtime
- Ensure the child eats healthily, is not overstimulated, and sleeps well
- Be organised - establish a good routine that minimises last-minute stress and panic
- Look after yourself, ensuring you are strong enough to look after others.

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If you need any further advice on Mental Health for Children and Young People, our partner [YoungMinds](#) provide a wealth of advice and information.

[The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service](#) (CAMHS) can be accessed through the NHS, often via a referral.