

How I (sometimes) cope with anxiety

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Ian Dury wryly noted that anxiety crippled (his word) him more than polio and in his wonderful song "[Crippled with Nerves](#)", anxiety is both disabling and a potential loss of social opportunity - but it's a pain **worth** enduring for a sufficiently rewarding end result (marriage and two children, in his case). I'd like to emphasise the role of **choice** and (social) reward.

Escape paths

(The black-headed gulls choose when to expend energy by looping over the river whenever humans or dogs approach, balancing the temperature, food availability, competition from other gulls for the perch, and how close the threat can approach. Panic is embarrassing for humans, and the result of feeling like there is no escape, e.g. in a cinema).



Nothing works, and everything works:

- Stim toys
- Exercise
- 4-7-8 breathing
- Journey rehearsal (Google Streetview) and support (Google Maps for buses)
- Mindfulness
- Progressive muscular relaxation
- Anti-anxiety and other medication
- Avoiding stressful situations

All of these take practice, rehearsal and integration with real anxiety-provoking incidents.

There is no "cure" for anxiety - and there should not be - but there is no 100% (or even 50%) effective coping mechanism. I felt like a failure in CBT (and reminded of it in a recent presentation) where professionals suggested their techniques would work, if only I tried hard enough.

- Some stress is good stress - stress is a motivator and a natural response to danger
- An episode of anxiety is not fatal
- Avoiding social anxiety also limits social opportunity, and so many other opportunities for education, leisure and health

A recent experience of anxiety leading to panic

I got stuck in the lift at #AsIAMConf19: the buttons didn't work, because the lift needs a room card, but the room card didn't work - the (tiny) instructions said "insert-and-remove", but the lift shot to 5th floor and then basement "staff only" area while I was trying to read the instructions...



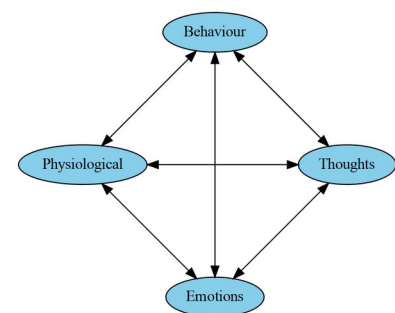
A staff member said that lift didn't go to ground floor and showed me stairs, which ALSO had no exit to ground floor! I felt like I was going to get stuck in the basement for ever, never find reception and get hunted down by angry chefs...

So I stood in the stairwell and waited until I calmed down. I didn't die and only two total strangers (who I hope I will never meet again) saw me freaking out. I made my way to the 1st floor, found a lift that DID go to ground floor, and got on with my day a little more tired.

- (meanwhile, in the world outside the lift)
- Do not minimise anxious people's fears, no matter how outlandish - they feel real
- Do not assume what works for some or most people will work for everyone, or in all situations
- (I feel completely unable to help my 18-year-old with anxiety - it feels too unique to each anxious person)
- Give space and time
- Keep 'helpful' strangers back (especially gawpers, and security staff)
- Use prompts to help recall things that help, e.g. using anxious incidents they got through before

Hot cross bun model

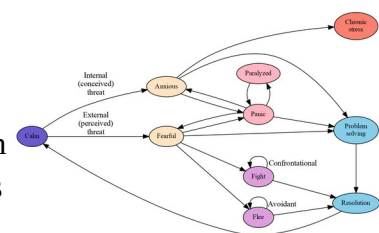
One thing I took from many, many hours of therapy was that in the Thoughts, Emotions, Physiological & Behaviour “Hot Cross Bun” model of anxiety/panic, snipping ANY one of those links does wonders to re-establish a sense of control - e.g. pause and breathe to **snip** the physiology links.



You **can't choose** how you feel, but you **can choose** how you respond (DBT) - you choose which works for you, or works for you today.

Paths to calm

I made a network diagram of my own fight-or-flight routes through fear and anxiety into the endless circling paralysis of panic, which can only be exited by problem-solving and / or resolution. There are loads of positive-feedback paths to keep me panicked and only one out.



Moving from fear or anxiety to problem solving / resolution as early as possible limits the possibility of chronic anxiety (which is the route to depression - I've been there, its horrible). Converting anxiety into problem-solving uses my systematizing skills and re-establishes a sense of control through choice.

Avoidance leads to more anxiety about events, before any fear-provoking stimulus. Avoiding lifts because they **might** crash or avoiding the bus because you **might** get called a faggot reinforces anxious thoughts, whereas taking the lift or bus desensitises the fear and increases opportunity.

So there is no magic cure to prevent panic, although hard work can reduce the frequency, but **panic doesn't kill**, you get through the other side alive. And avoidance does you no favours.