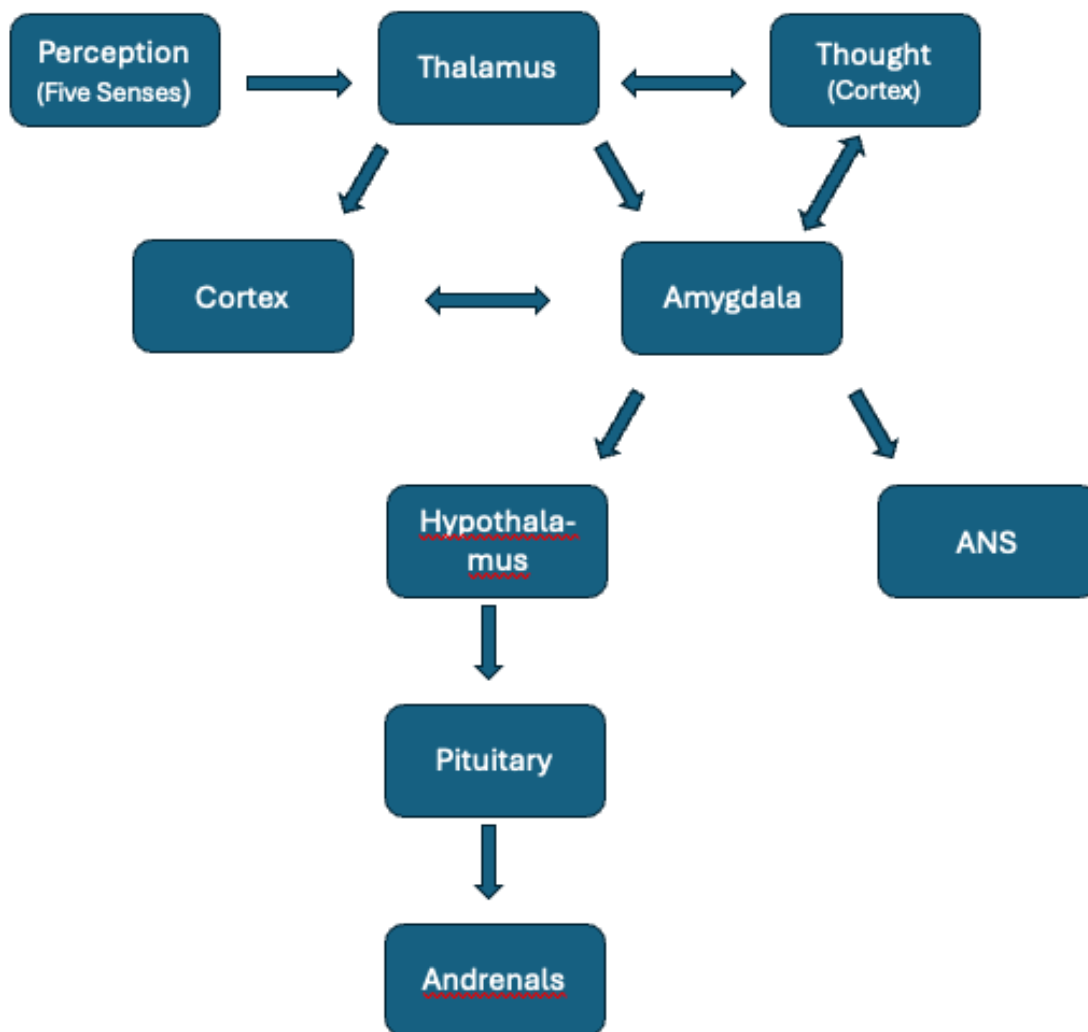


Anxiety Workshop, CBCS, October 5, 2026
Wallace K. Pond, Ph.D., MA, LPC

What Anxiety Is

A simple way to think about anxiety is as a false alarm in the brain's threat detection system, i.e., "Fight or Flight." In other words, the warning system in the brain believes there is danger when none is actually present, although there may be some level of threat. It errs on the side of danger, activating the sympathetic nervous system, because that is safer even though it causes an unpleasant, and often unnecessary, response. The fear and feelings are real regardless of the presence of actual danger. What's really interesting is that most anxiety is secondary, i.e., it is anxiety about anxiety!

How the Threat Detection System Works in the Brain



Yes, Anxiety Is Increasing

We know from extensive epidemiological evidence that the prevalence of anxiety is, in fact, increasing.

Rates of anxiety for young people, 16-24 years of age, in the U.S. have *more than doubled* in the last 20 years with about 30% actually receiving a diagnosis related to anxiety at some point. Using survey data, among older adults, 43% reported feeling more anxious in 2024 than they did in 2023 and research by Gallup finds that about one fifth of adults in the workplace report anxiety so intense they cannot continue daily activities for two weeks or longer. Anxiety in all population groups has increased since 2020 (more for youth and females) with an unknown number experiencing what we might call clinically significant anxiety symptoms.

Reasons Why Anxiety Is More Prevalent

- **Chronic Uncertainty:** When uncertainty becomes prolonged rather than acute, the nervous system stays activated. Chronic unpredictability is a powerful anxiety amplifier.
- **Economic Strain:** Concerns over paying bills, housing costs, and financial stability are major drivers.
- **The COVID-19 Pandemic:** The lasting impact of the pandemic, including social isolation and collective trauma, created a high baseline of stress.
- **Technology and Social Media:** Increased exposure to global crises, constant connectivity, and social media-induced FOMO (fear of missing out) and a sense of inadequacy exacerbate anxiety. Tech also encourages isolation and the mediation of human connection at a distance. It is based on constant comparison to curated un-reality.
- **Decreased In-Person Community:** Humans regulate stress through co-regulation. Reduced community buffering increases vulnerability to anxiety and technology mediated relationships do not provide key benefits of in person interaction.
- **Suppression of Emotion:** When we bury emotions, we bury them alive, which creates dissonance and ultimately anxiety and dysregulation.
- **Social and Political Environment:** A polarized political climate, concerns about violence, and environmental anxiety (climate change) heavily affect mental health, especially in younger generations. Trump as president is triggering in its own right.
- **Diet and Consumption of Psychoactive Substances:** Substantial amounts of sugar, highly processed foods, and synthetic ingredients as well as caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, cannabis and other substances exacerbate hypervigilance.

- **Biological Factors:** Epidemic sleep deprivation (particularly in teens), reduced outdoor activity, **evolutionary mismatch (HPA axis evolved for profoundly different environment)**, diet, use of psychoactive substances,
- **Increased Awareness and Reduced Stigma:** Improved recognition of mental health conditions has led to higher rates of self-reporting and seeking treatment.

Reasons Why Anxiety Is More Prevalent

There are many factors contributing to a population wide rise in anxiety, including environmental, biological, social, emotional, and technological.



Chronic Uncertainty

When uncertainty becomes prolonged rather than acute, the nervous system stays activated. Chronic unpredictability is a powerful anxiety amplifier.



Economic Strain

Concerns over paying bills, housing costs, and financial stability are major drivers of anxiety.



The COVID-19 Pandemic

The lasting impact of the pandemic, including social isolation and collective trauma, created a high baseline of stress.



Technology and Social Media

Increased exposure to global crises, constant connectivity, and social media-induced FOMO (fear of missing out) and a sense of inadequacy exacerbate anxiety. Tech also encourages isolation and the mediation of human connection at a distance. It is based on constant comparison to curated un-reality.



Decreased In-Person Community

Humans regulate stress through co-regulation. Reduced community buffering increases vulnerability to anxiety and technology mediated relationships do not provide key benefits of in person interaction.



Suppression of Emotion

When we bury emotions, we bury them alive, which creates dissonance and ultimately anxiety and dysregulation.



Social and Political Environment

A polarized political climate, concerns about violence, and environmental anxiety (climate change) heavily affect mental health, especially in younger generations. Trump as president is triggering in its own right.



Diet and Consumption of Psychoactive Substances

Substantial amounts of sugar, highly processed foods, and synthetic ingredients as well as caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, cannabis and other substances exacerbate hypervigilance.



Biological Factors

Epidemic sleep deprivation (particularly in teens), reduced outdoor activity, evolutionary mismatch (HPA axis evolved for profoundly different environment), diet, and use of psychoactive substances all contribute to increased anxiety.



Increased Awareness and Reduced Stigma

Improved recognition of mental health conditions has led to higher rates of self-reporting and seeking treatment.

UNDERSTANDING THE BIGGER PICTURE HELPS US RESPOND WITH COMPASSION AND CHOICE

Anxiety Tends to Increase When:

Anxiety Tends to **Increase** When:



Threat feels constant

The nervous system stays on high alert.



Perceived control feels low

Life feels unpredictable or overwhelming.



Comparison to others is high

We focus on what others have or are doing.



Connection with others is limited

We feel isolated or unsupported.



Rest and sleep are insufficient

The body and mind don't get the recovery they need.



— AWARENESS CREATES CHOICE —

What We Can Do about Our Own Anxiety

Fortunately, there are a number of things we can do that significantly influence how anxiety affects us. The objective is not to eliminate anxiety, which is not possible regardless, but to fundamentally alter our relationship with it.

- Create a relationship with anxiety based on curiosity and acceptance*
- Honor all emotion: feel and express what makes sense in the moment
- Sleep
- Build and use a daily mindfulness practice
- Learn somatic approaches for calming and re-regulation of the neurological system
- Limit or eliminate exposure to social media
- Find and engage in daily, in-person interactions
- Pursue and engage in at least one relationship that is psychologically safe
- Spend time outdoors every day, preferably in sunlight
- Limit or eliminate highly processed foods and sugar
- Limit or eliminate psychoactive substances (alcohol, cannabis, nicotine, caffeine, etc.)
- Slow down: Build time into your daily schedule that does not have deadlines or deliverables

* When we behave as if anxiety is something to be feared, that confirms in the brain that there is actual danger rather than a false alarm.

You Can Change Your Relationship with Anxiety

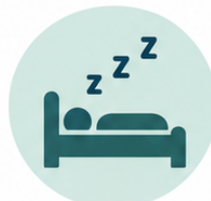
Fortunately, there are a number of things we can do that significantly influence how anxiety affects us. The objective is not to eliminate anxiety, which is not possible regardless, but to fundamentally alter our relationship with it.



Create a relationship with anxiety based on curiosity and acceptance*



Honor all emotion
Feel and express what makes sense in the moment.



Sleep
Prioritize consistent, restorative sleep.



Build a daily mindfulness practice
Be present. Notice. Breathe.



Learn somatic approaches
Use body-based practices for calming and re-regulation of the neurological system.



Limit or eliminate social media
Reduce exposure to constant comparison and information overload.



Engage in daily, in-person interactions
Connection with others supports resilience and well-being.



Pursue a psychologically safe relationship
Invest in at least one relationship where you feel accepted and supported as you are.



Spend time outdoors every day
Preferably in sunlight. Nature supports mood, regulation, and perspective.



Limit highly processed foods and sugar
Choose whole, nourishing foods that support mental and physical health.



Limit psychoactive substances
Reduce or eliminate alcohol, cannabis, nicotine, caffeine, and other psychoactive substances.



Slow down
Build time into your daily schedule that does not have deadlines or deliverables.

**Curiosity and acceptance do not mean approval. They allow you to respond with greater awareness, choice, and self-compassion.*

SMALL STEPS MAKE A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE

Dealing with Anxiety in the Moment

Anxiety is essentially a false alarm triggered by the brain's threat detection system, what we often call the "fight or flight" response, which activates the sympathetic nervous system. This process evolved for, and is very effective related to, immediate existential danger, but is frankly very bad at responding to most modern triggers of threat. It simply can't distinguish between the existential peril of a predator and the stress of a critical email from one's boss or the distress of not being able to pay a bill.

Because it doesn't feel good, the instinct is to immediately suppress anxiety (medication, breathwork, distraction), but this signals to your brain that there *is* real danger, making the cycle worse. The goal, instead, is to first change your relationship with anxiety, then work to activate the *parasympathetic* nervous system which calms us after activation.

Steps for Dealing with Anxiety in the Moment

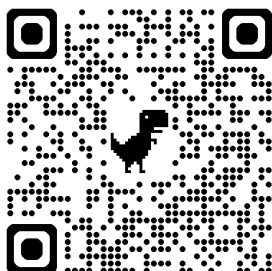
1. Welcome it with curiosity — treat anxiety as a well-meaning but misguided friend, not an enemy
2. Sit with it — notice how it feels without resistance. Be extremely curious about everything you feel in your body. Talk to it (but not as an enemy).
3. *Then*, once you've engaged non-combatively, use calming practices (deep breathing, grounding, etc.) to re-regulate your nervous system.*
4. Gently shift your focus from the anxiety itself to problem solving, i.e., since this is a false alarm with no actual danger: I'm worried about something and how can I address or solve the problem (action oriented)?

*A simple breathing process is to inhale through the nose for a count to four, then exhale out through the mouth for a count to eight. The goal is for the exhale to be at least twice as long as the inhale.

Summary

Anxiety is a false alarm in the brain's threat detection system (fight or flight). For a variety of reasons, the prevalence of anxiety has increased dramatically over the last few decades, particularly for youth and females. Fortunately, there are tools we can use to change our relationship with anxiety, and thus, change how it affects us.

You can find the presentation, including all graphics, here:



<https://wallacekpond.com/cbcs-anxiety-workshop/>