

**Anxiety:** Anxiety feels pretty unpleasant -- and we all suffer from it at one time or another, some people worse than others. There are different kinds of anxiety:

Free floating anxiety that seems to hang around for no apparent reason.

“Predictive anxiety” where you make predictions in your head about something awful happens to you, a loved one, your job, etc.

- Natural “freeze, flight or fight” anxiety that comes up when you’re in dangerous situations.
- Existential anxiety that has you questioning the meaning of your life.
- Anxieties or phobias of particular things like public speaking, flying on planes, or being assertive.

Anxiety is there for a reason, it’s natural. The problem is, sometimes the anxiety gets out of hand and rather than helping us (by alerting us to avoid things like poisonous snakes) it gets in our way (by preventing us from leaving the house). That’s because fear and anxiety were crucial feelings for our ancestors who were out hunting and gathering; if they should run into a lion, it would be perfectly rational to fear for your life. You’d need the energy from the anxiety to decide whether to stand still, run as fast as you could, or prepare yourself to fight the best fight you could. What’s NOT rational is having the same depth of feeling (i.e. a life or death fear) of something going wrong at a team meeting at work.

A great deal of the work that is done in therapy with anxiety is usually about working out what is or isn’t rational. This can take some thinking, and when you DO think about it, you may even find that “free floating” anxiety has reasons behind it after all. We inherit all sorts of irrational beliefs from growing up. Beliefs like “the smallest mistake should be taken as a great failure” or “I must always do things perfectly,” or, “if he/she doesn’t do the thing I’m hoping for or expect, it will be AWFUL.”

Working out what those beliefs are and how to attack them with evidence and rationality can be a really great help. It can give you pretty good results pretty quickly too. Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) said that the things that most often get in our way are:

**Musterbating:** Thinking that something **MUST** happen and if it doesn't it's **AWFUL**.

**Awfulising:** See above: overestimating how awful something is or might be.

**Catastrophising:** Like awfulising: creating nasty scenarios in your head that may never happen.

**Underestimating your ability to cope with an event while overestimating how awful that even may be.**

Learning to identify irrational thinking and replacing it with rational thinking is a great help. It's something I'm trained to help you do.

The less "rational" anxieties like existential anxiety are not as straightforward because they usually indicate that something is going on in your life (or not going on) that needs attention. It might take a bit more digging to get some answers. It's also important to know that having existential anxieties like "what's the meaning of my life," "how do I make sense of my own mortality," or "how much choice do I really have" are all valid questions to ask in this weird and wonderful life of ours. Because of such a wide variety of anxious experiences, the integrative approach becomes quite handy. Sometimes life itself is irrational, and it can be difficult to make sense of it.

Another source of anxiety is likely to come from needs not being adequately met in childhood. This often feels like anxiety without a particular reason -- but it can pop up in situations that prevent you from having the life that you want -- like getting anxious or shutting down just when a relationship gets serious.

Working through anxieties with an experienced psychotherapist is wise. Still there is some work you can do on your own and make some pretty good headway.

A couple self-help books can help you see your options more clearly:

*Mind over Mood; change how you feel by changing the way you think.* By Dennis Greenberger, PhD and Christine Padesky, PhD.

*Feel the Fear and do it Anyway.* By Susan Jeffers, PhD.

If you're interested in the cognitive theory of anxiety, check out:

*Cognitive Therapy and Emotional Disorders,* by Aaron Beck.

*Anxiety Disorders and Phobias; a cognitive perspective,* by Aaron Beck and Gary Emery.