

Anxiety: a modern tiger

By Dennis Sugrue
special writer

Have you ever been attacked by a tiger? Even if you say no, your body might disagree. All of us have experienced episodes of nervousness or anxiety. Sometimes this anxiety is clearly related to the circumstances in which we find ourselves such as speaking before a large audience. Other times, the anxious feeling seems to come from out of nowhere.

Anxiety may come and go quickly, as if it were an attack; or anxiety may linger for days, weeks or months, as if it were an unwanted house guest who has no intention of leaving.

For some people, anxiety or nervousness is so intense and occurs so frequently that it becomes a major impairment to daily living.

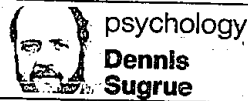
ALTHOUGH SYMPTOMS of anxiety are often frightening and disruptive, they are the result of a normal physical process. They have helped to insure the survival of man since the beginning of time.

When animals or human beings encounter a threat, there is an instinct either to run away or to fight viciously. An automatic "emergency system" takes over and coordinates the functioning of the body to maximize vigilance, strength and endurance.

Imagine one of our early ancestors suddenly being cornered by a tiger. To survive, our ancestor will have to do a quick disappearing act or fight for his life.

A chain of body reactions automatically occurs. Muscles tense, preparing for a possible struggle. Blood vessels near the surface of the skin constrict, preventing profuse bleeding in the event of superficial injury.

Because oxygen is an important ingredient for fueling the body, breathing speeds up to help meet the suddenly increased demand. Likewise, the heart beats faster to quickly move the oxygen-rich blood



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to vital organs throughout the body.

DURING THIS state of crisis, non-essential body processes such as digestion are temporarily placed on the back burner. Digesting this morning's breakfast suddenly becomes irrelevant if one does not live to see tonight's dinner.

Blood is therefore partially diverted away from the abdominal region to more crucial areas of the body such as the heart, lungs and muscles in the arms and legs.

We rarely run across tigers in our modern world, but our bodies do not make the distinction between a tiger and any other threatening situation. If our minds identify something as being a threat, the emergency system is activated.

LET'S IMAGINE a 20th century man who, rather than being cornered by a tiger, is cornered by his boss after being late for work.

Our hero's muscles tense up even though a physical fight or flight is unlikely. Rather, trembling or a tension headache may be the more likely result.

Constricting blood vessels cause the sensation of shivering. Rapid breathing may lead to light-headedness, chest pain and feelings of numbness in different parts of the body. The racing heart beat may suddenly raise the conscious fears about the "Big One" being at the near horizon.

Suspension of digestion and the diversion of blood from the abdomen results in the stomach feeling as if it is tied in knots or is being invaded by a swarm of butterflies. Because the body is on a state of

alert, sleep that night will be difficult.

JUST AS our ancestors had to learn how to cope with tigers, it is important for each of us in modern times to learn how to cope effectively with anxiety.

A first step toward learning to cope with anxiety is understanding the cause of the physical symptoms. Things in life tend to be much less frightening when we understand them.

Future columns will be devoted to exploring further techniques for recognizing and dealing with our ever present, modern day tiger — anxiety.

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