



THREE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

An Anxiety Guide for Kids, Teens, and Adults

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TURNING CHALLENGES INTO GROWTH

CAVEMAN BRAINS

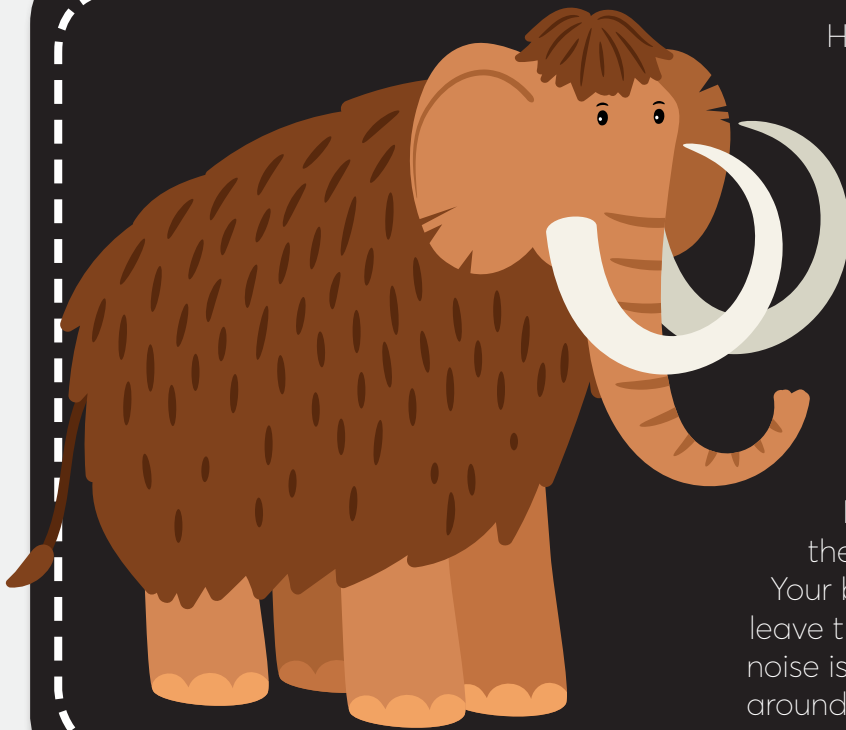


Cavemen were not known to be intelligent people. They had smaller brains than humans do today. They were known, and named for, living in caves. When cavemen were at home they could relax and feel safe. But the world outside of their caves was dangerous. They might find themselves being hunted by a hungry animal. Cavemen couldn't just stay in their caves forever. They would eventually get hungry and would have to venture out to find food and water.

Caveman brains really had one main job to do: help a caveman **survive**. So, when cavemen were out and about looking for food, their brains would be on high alert, listening and looking for signs of danger. If a caveman's brain detected a possible threat, the brain would go into survival mode. The caveman's brain would signal "danger!" and get the caveman ready to fight off the threat, run away from the threat, or freeze and try to hide from the threat. We call that fight, flight, or freeze and it's a safety feature that our brains still have today.

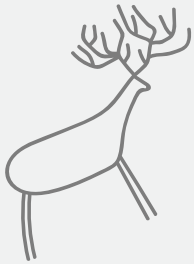
Fight, flight, or freeze is a useful safety feature that our brains are equipped with! Think about this, if you were chasing a ball into the street and all of a sudden you heard a car coming, your caveman brain would signal, "danger!" Then, fight, flight, or freeze would kick in. Your brain would send your body a jolt of energy to run out of the street (flight). If you were still on the curb and not yet on the street, freeze would kick in and you would stand, practically glued to the curb, staring at the car as it drove past. All of that happens automatically - you don't have to stop and think what the best thing to do is and you don't have to decide if you should fight, run away, or freeze - your caveman brain takes care of all of that to protect you and to help you survive.



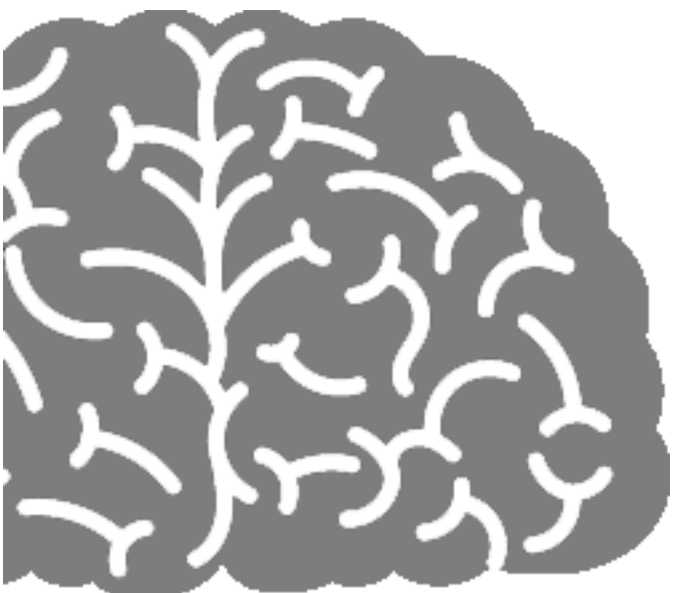


Here's the thing: fight, flight, or freeze keeps us safe when we are **actually** in danger. But some people have really eager, overactive caveman brains. These people live like they're stepping outside of their caves into a very dangerous world. They are always on the lookout for danger. Their brains signal "danger!" for ordinary things, setting off fight, flight, or freeze when there isn't any actual danger.

It's like going to get your ball out of the street and hearing a rustling noise. Your brain signals "danger!" and you can't leave the curb - even though the rustling noise isn't a car - just some leaves blowing around in the street.



That faulty, overactive, always-on-alert kind of brain can lead people to feel anxious, scared, and worried when they're actually perfectly safe. Their reactions - fight, flight, or freeze - can get in their way and make it really hard for them to do important or fun things. That reaction can also make it hard for them to get along with other people or feel good about themselves.



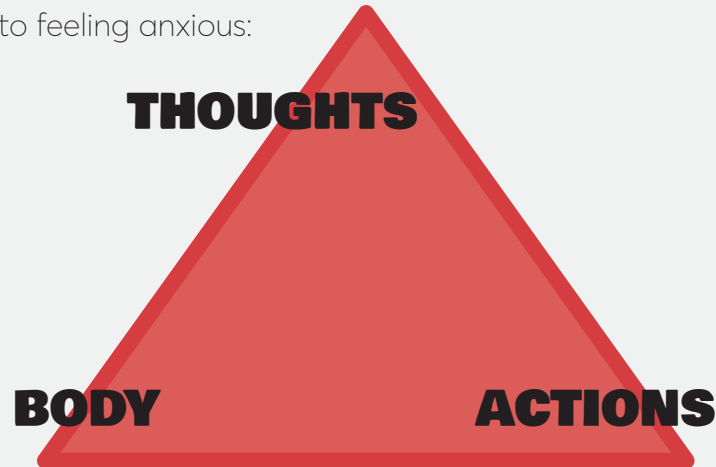
We all still have that caveman part of our brains, but over time humans have evolved. Our brains have gotten bigger and can handle many more jobs than just surviving. Our modern brains are really good at thinking, reasoning, problem solving, and using logic. Managing anxiety means learning to let our caveman brains protect us when we are actually in danger and using our modern brains to help us get through situations that might feel scary but aren't life threatening.

Let's move on to the next thing...

TRIANGLES

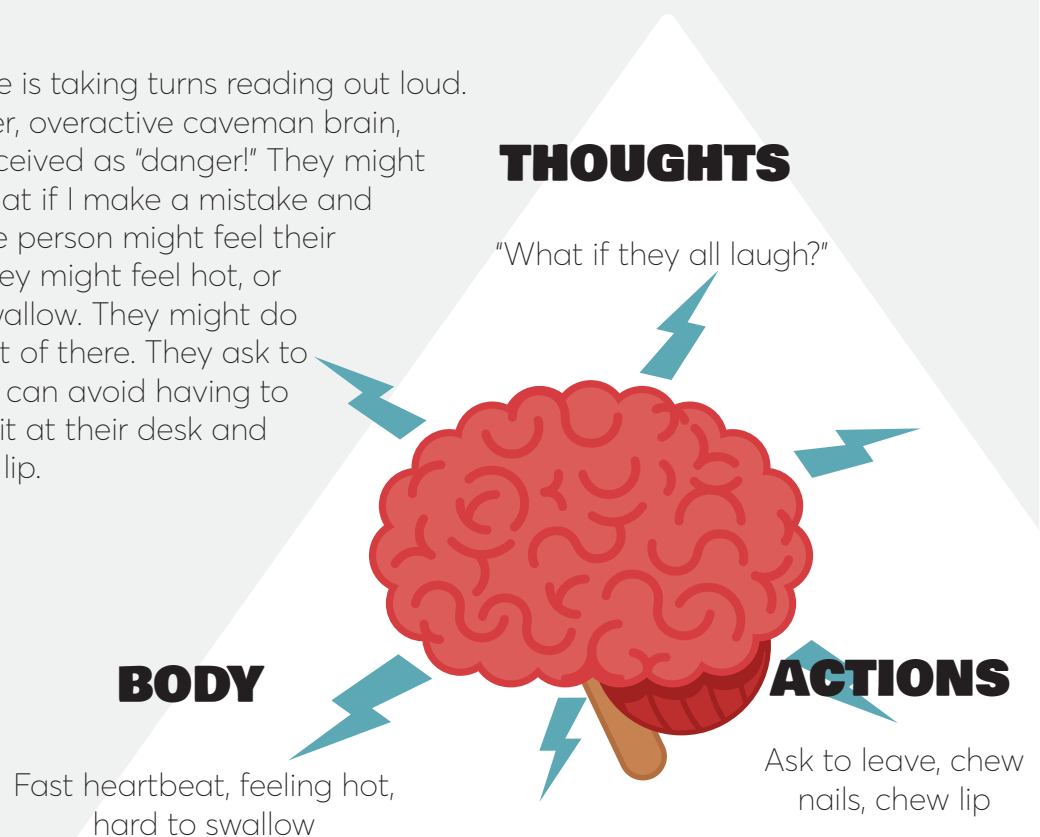


There are three parts to feeling anxious:



Here's an example:

A person is in class. Everyone is taking turns reading out loud. For the person with an eager, overactive caveman brain, reading aloud might be perceived as "danger!" They might start thinking things like, "what if I make a mistake and everyone laughs at me?" The person might feel their heart start to beat faster, they might feel hot, or they might find it hard to swallow. They might do anything they can to get out of there. They ask to go to the bathroom so they can avoid having to take a turn. Or, they might sit at their desk and bite their nails or chew their lip.



One of the first steps to managing anxiety is learning what the anxiety triangle for different situations feels like for you. Not everyone has the same types of anxious thoughts or feelings in their bodies and people have different actions they take when they feel anxious. Understanding your own anxiety triangle makes it easier for you to figure out how to feel calm.

MY THOUGHTS

Think of the last time you felt anxious.

What did your thoughts, body, and actions look like?

MY BODY

MY ACTIONS

Because guess what? There are three parts to feeling calm: calm thoughts, calm bodies, and calm actions.



THOUGHTS

BODY

ACTIONS

Managing anxiety means learning how to get yourself calm. You can do that by changing your anxious thoughts to calm and helpful thoughts, by learning how to relax your body, or by doing things that help you feel distracted, relaxed, or safe. Just like everyone's anxiety triangles are unique, our calm triangles are unique, too. You can learn, try out, and practice lots of different ways to get calm and figure out which strategies work best for you.

FOOLS, POOLS & TOOLS

Don't be fooled by anxious actions. Lots of times, anxious actions involve escaping or avoiding feeling anxious. *Well, duh.*

If a person feels scared in their bed alone at night, that person is going to try to do something that takes away that awful, scary feeling. They might go into a parent's room or cry. They might make it really hard for the parent to leave their room until they fall asleep.

When a parent is near, that awful, scary feeling goes right away. The person feels safe and comfortable and they fall asleep. Problem solved, right?

Wrong.

The actions people take when they are anxious make the uncomfortable feeling go away pretty quickly, but usually only for a little bit. What's worse, the story you tell yourself becomes something like this:



It's dangerous to be alone at night. I know that because it feels bad and I have lots of scary thoughts.

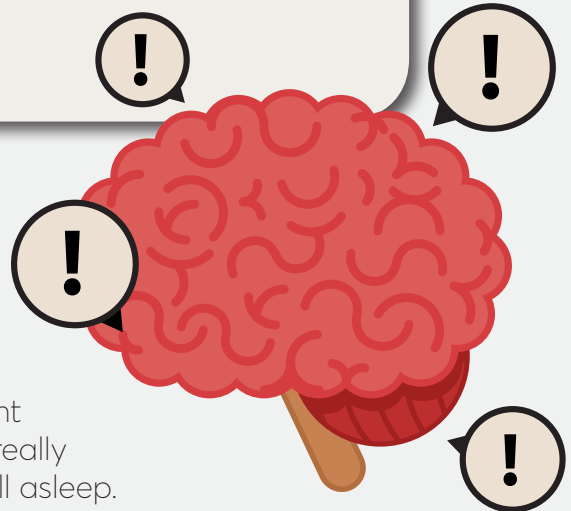
I go to my parents' room and the bad feelings and scary thoughts go away when I'm with them.

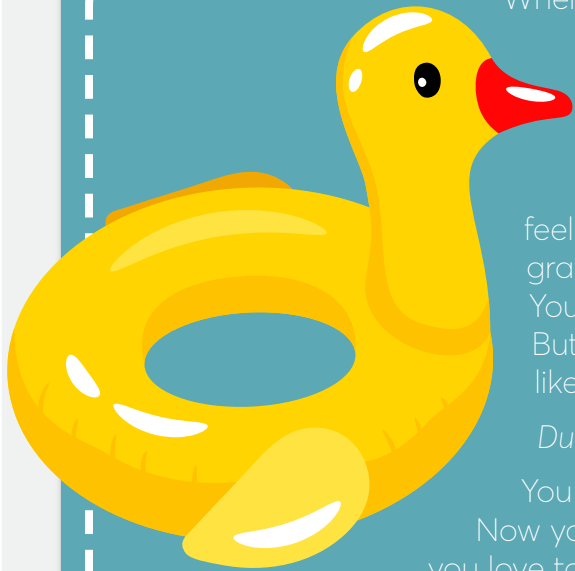
It must be true, I'm not safe when I'm alone and I am safe when I'm with them. I should not be alone at night because I will be in danger.

When that's the story, the anxiety gets stronger. Parents get fooled by anxious actions, too. They see their kid feeling so bad and scared and they see the anxious action taking all of that away...for a short time. Eventually, that anxiety gets stronger and bigger and sometimes starts to tell a new story:

It it's dangerous to be away from my parents at night, maybe I shouldn't be away from them during the day. It feels unsafe being away from them when I'm at school so maybe I should just go home and be close by.

Yep, I feel better when I'm with my mom during the day time, too. I guess I'm in danger when I'm away from her anytime. I should always stay close by so I don't feel scared because if I feel scared, that means I'm in danger.





When thinking about anxious actions, it's helpful to think about swimming pools. Pretend you are the sort of person who loves to go swimming but you hate to feel cold. You're excited because you're heading to the pool on a beautiful summer day. You get to the pool, get your sunscreen on, and jump in only to find that the water is cold. You hate feeling cold and uncomfortable so you get out of the pool. You grab your towel, dry off, and you feel nice and warm in the sun. You're at the pool and you love swimming, so you get back in. But, the water is cold and you're uncomfortable and you don't like feeling uncomfortable so you get out.

Duh. Who wants to feel uncomfortable?

You warm up, that feels better and you're nice and comfortable. Now your friends are in the pool. They're having a good time and you love to swim with your friends so you hop in. Buuuut, the water is cold and you're uncomfortable so you get out. All day, you're in and out of the pool and then it's time to go home. You missed swimming, you missed having fun with your friends, and you never felt all that comfortable for very long.

Of course, if you've ever gone swimming, you know that it would be silly to get out every time you felt cold. Why? Because usually, when you stay in the pool for a little while, you don't feel cold anymore. What happens? Your body gets used to that uncomfortable cold feeling and it goes away. Sometimes, it takes awhile to warm up. Experienced swimmers learn tricks to speed it up. They bob around in the water, they distract themselves with friends, sometimes they just take a deep dive and swim underwater to get it over with.

You can learn tricks to help that uncomfortable feeling go away. You can also learn tools to help you cope with the scary thoughts and uncomfortable feelings in your body. And - you can learn actions to help you feel calm and to make the anxiety weaker instead of stronger.

You might have learned some tools over the years like taking deep breaths or doing something to distract yourself. If those tools work to help you get calm, use them!

Therapists can help you learn new tools to get calm and take the strength away from the anxiety. They can also teach your parents how to respond to you when you're feeling anxious and, more importantly, how to help you feel calm and not let anxiety get in your way.

