

2 the chemistry of anxiety

for you to know

Our bodies respond to anxious thoughts by emitting stress hormones. This built-in biological reaction is called the fight-or-flight response.

In prehistoric times, humans faced challenges different from those they face today. For example, a common challenge for prehistoric man may have been to walk outside his cave in the morning and find himself face-to-face with a huge, hungry lion.

Human bodies are miraculous creations that are programmed to survive. When confronted with a threat such as a lion, the brain would send the signal, "Threat!" and the body would respond by shooting hormones, such as adrenaline, into the bloodstream at lightning speed. That made the body immediately stronger and faster so the human could either wrestle the lion (fight) or run away very fast (flight). When humans either fought or ran away, the physical exertion would disperse the hormones, and the body chemistry would quickly return to normal.

In today's world, our bodies still release stress hormones when we are faced with a threat. The chemical release raises our blood sugar, heart rate, blood pressure, and pulse; slows our digestion; dilates our pupils; and causes us to breathe more shallowly. While these changes prepare us for fast action, we don't usually take it, so our hormones don't disperse. You may become anxious when you look at the history test your teacher has just handed you and realize you don't know any of the answers, but you are not likely to respond by fighting with the history teacher or running from the classroom. As you sit at your desk "stewing," the anxiety just continues to build. Built-up anxiety makes us vulnerable to emotional and physical problems. To stay healthy, we have to find ways to avoid or disperse those chemicals.

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directions

In the space below, draw a picture of yourself standing at the door of your bedroom first thing in the morning. Outside your bedroom door, draw or write all of the challenges you are confronted with on an average day that might cause your body to emit stress chemicals.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for a drawing or written response. It occupies the central and lower portion of the page.

more to do

Look at your picture of daily challenges. Write them here in the order of how anxious they make you feel. Write those that make you feel most anxious first and those that make you feel least anxious last.

Describe the physical symptoms you experience when you feel anxious about any of these things.

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Our bodies emit flight-or-flight response chemicals whether the threat we perceive is internal, external, real, or imagined. Which challenges in your picture are:

internal?	external?	real?	imagined?
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Do you react by physically fighting or physically running away from any of these threats?

Describe how you react if you don't fight or run away.

Describe any realistic ideas you have about how you could release the buildup of stress hormones from your body.
