

Why Am I Anxious?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies [Why Am I Anxious? Four Kinds of Anxiety and the Four Stages of an Emotional Reaction](#) at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which walks through each kind of anxiety, when anxiety is accurate, and how the four stages shape what happens next. Search “why am I anxious” on the site to find it.

Anxiety comes from four different places, and all four can arrive as the same racing heart. Knowing which one we are in tells us what it is asking for. One moment can belong to more than one. Choose a recent moment of anxiety, sort it, and then match the response to the kind. A few words per space is enough.

THE FIRST SNAKE The snake is in the room	Present danger. The spike is accurate and the anxiety is information. It asks for protection: leaving, getting help, ending the threat, and then someone steady while the body catches up.
THE SECOND SNAKE The snake was in the room	A present cue resembles a past danger. The danger has passed and the body has yet to recognize it. Much attachment injury lives here. It asks for help in learning that the danger is over, and for behavior that invites regulation instead of recruiting a second nervous system into threat.
THE THIRD SNAKE There might be a snake	The mind's own hypotheses become the stimulus. The conscious form is the thinking we can watch ourselves build. The unconscious form arrives already built, a story the mind supplies for arousal it has not traced. It asks for the hypothesis to be examined and the arousal traced to its source. <i>Is my ability to imagine it being treated as evidence that it is here?</i> <i>What was I already carrying before the story arrived?</i>
THE FOURTH SNAKE My life is out of alignment	Existential anxiety. Our behavior and our values have drifted apart. Reassurance does little here, because the anxiety may be accurate. It asks for movement toward congruence, and fear can be present without deciding the choice.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: ONE ROOT, MORE THAN ONE SNAKE

THE MOMENT	On a trail where rattlesnakes are common, a root in peripheral vision. The body reacts before we know what we saw.
FIRST SNAKE	Partly. In rattlesnake country, reacting as though it is a snake until we are sure is intelligent. A false alarm costs a moment.
SECOND SNAKE	Yes. Years of vigilance around rattlesnakes. The spike is bigger than the root.
THIRD SNAKE	Yes, twice. A snake is a reasonable hypothesis here. Later, untraced arousal turns a partner's plans for the evening into jealousy.
MATCHED RESPONSE	Look directly at the root. Let the body settle. Then trace the leftover arousal before it finds a story to attach to.

Sorting the moment

THE MOMENT

What was happening when the anxiety arrived? Where was I, and who was there?

How strong was it? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

THE FIRST SNAKE

Is in the room

Check what applies.

- ☐ Something in front of me could actually hurt me or someone I love
- ☐ My read of the room has been right before
- ☐ A person here is not safe, whether or not I can explain why
- ☐ Leaving or getting help would change the danger itself

THE SECOND SNAKE

Was in the room

Check what applies.

- ☐ This resembles something that happened before
- ☐ My body reacted before I knew what I saw
- ☐ The reaction is bigger than what is in front of me
- ☐ Closeness, conflict, or ambiguity is involved

IT RESEMBLES...

THE THIRD SNAKE

Might be in the room

Check what applies.

- ☐ I can build a strong case that it could happen
- ☐ Reassurance lands as being called irrational
- ☐ The more I think, the stronger it gets
- ☐ The feeling showed up first and the reason came later

THE FOURTH SNAKE

My life is out of alignment

Check what applies.

- ☐ There is something I keep not doing
- ☐ The anxiety returns even when nothing is wrong
- ☐ What I do and what I value have drifted apart
- ☐ Calming down returns me to the same place

WHICH SNAKE, OR SNAKES?

More than one is common. Name them, and which one is loudest.

Two checks before responding

IS THE ANXIETY ACCURATE?

An absence of evidence is different from evidence of safety. Sometimes the analytical mind talks us out of a danger that is real.

WHAT DID I SENSE BEFORE I COULD EXPLAIN IT?

WHAT WOULD I DO IF I TRUSTED THAT READ?

UNTRACED AROUSAL

Arousal that has not been traced to its source goes looking for a story.

WHAT WAS I ALREADY CARRYING (A SCARE, POOR SLEEP, AN EARLIER CONFLICT)?

DID THE FEELING GO LOOKING FOR A REASON? WHAT STORY DID IT FIND?

Matching the response to the kind

Fill in only the snakes that apply.

THE FIRST SNAKE**Protection**

What would end or reduce the actual danger, and who can help?

THE SECOND SNAKE**Recognition**

What would help my body learn this is over? Who could I tell, and how could I say it so it invites regulation?

THE THIRD SNAKE**Reality testing**

What is the hypothesis, and what is it built from? What would let the possibility stop feeding the spike?

The fourth snake

Fear organizes around the risk of acting. Existential anxiety organizes around the cost of continuing not to act. Both can be true at once.

WHAT I KEEP NOT DOING

A relationship, a vocation, or something smaller: the open mic night, the team, the trip.

TWO COSTS

Acting and not
acting

Name both honestly. Neither column cancels the other.

THE COST OF ACTING (WHAT I FEAR)

THE COST OF CONTINUING NOT TO ACT

THE VALUE

What it points
toward

What value is the anxiety pointing at?

ONE MOVEMENT TOWARD CONGRUENCE

Small is fine. The fear can stay present and still stop deciding.

THE STEP:

WHEN:

WHO COULD STAND BESIDE ME WHILE I TAKE IT:

Placating and advocating can look alike from the outside. Understanding everyone's side but our own was often an adaptation, and a smart one. The adult work is learning to advocate.