

The Reinforcing Nature of Anxiety

In order to understand the tenacity of anxiety, it is important to grasp its reinforcing nature. Anxiety is an uncomfortable state to be in – no one likes feeling anxious. It makes sense that we will naturally avoid things that make us uncomfortable.

Psychologically, we may do this by:

1. *Behaviorally* avoiding physical objects that evoke that uncomfortable anxiety
2. Distracting our minds from *thoughts* that make us uncomfortable or anxious

and/or
3. Avoiding feelings that make us especially uncomfortable or anxious

The problem is that avoidance is *reinforcing*. Even without our conscious involvement, our physical body will naturally move from a state of physical distress (the anxious state) to a state of comparative relaxation (a non-anxious state). On a concrete behavioral level, the avoidance pattern is rewarded and therefore reinforced. Our non-conscious mind/body is even capable of implicitly ‘remembering’ how to escape the anxiety-provoking situation, making it more likely that we will continue to avoid similar situations in the future. This is how anxiety can be reinforcing, and how individuals can often find themselves caught within its grasp.



Part of the solution must in some way involve challenging the anxiety – that is, implicitly teaching one’s mind/body that there is nothing to fear. A good clinician can create a personalized therapy to help an individual identify the source of their anxiety and insight as to its role, while also helping them overcome potential roadblocks to ridding themselves of their anxiety once and for all.