Evolution produced us: today’s fabulous human beings. But… there are a few design flaws. And some primitive responses we’ve been saddled with that often do more harm than good these days. But we can learn to understand and control them with CBT…

What is ‘fight or flight’? When we perceive a threat, our bodies go into ‘fight or flight’ mode in an instant – this physical response was developed during evolution to help us survive the sabre-toothed tiger, or that troublemaker that was trying to oust us from the tribe, or indeed anything that threatened our survival.

“Fight or flight is an instant pumping up of our bodies (with a series of physiological changes) that better equips us to fight hard or run fast from ‘danger’ – it prepares us for extreme physical action in an instant.”

Here are a couple of examples that will explain the immediacy and effects of fight or flight:-

- You walk over to your lovely bowl of fruit. Reach in, and… ‘OH! a big SPIDER! EEK’. The natural reaction is to jump back – our bodies instantly revving into fight or flight, our hearts thump, our stomachs tighten into a knot etc. But within a few moments, we (well most of us) realise there is no extreme danger here – and our bodies return to a natural balance very quickly.

- You’re in bed. You’re woken by a crash sound somewhere in your home. A BURGLAR?! You are instantly alert – you spring up, tilt your head back, eyes focussing in the middle distance for danger, ears straining to hear what’s going on, your heart pumping and lungs expanding to take more oxygen, heat rising in your body, ready to take whatever action is required (this can include ‘freezing’ which protected us from notice of predators etc)… then your flatmate shouts in ‘sorry, only me, I dropped a plate’. Deep sigh as your body returns to balance and calms down…

Those are examples of real practical problems that would benefit from fight or flight… after all, if you had to deal with a giant tarantula or a violent intruder, you would make good use of your body in its prepped and revved up state, right? And in both cases, within a very short time, we realise there has been a mistake in processing the event, an ‘irrational cognition’, and our body returns to balance (homeostasis) very quickly. But many of us fight ‘invisible tigers’ constantly – imagining dangers and threats where there are none, which brings on our flight or flight even when there is no real danger present. This is at the very least uncomfortable, and at worst results in regular panic attacks and ongoing physical illness.

So… danger is often psychological rather than physical. Situations only bring on ‘fight or flight’ if you perceive them as dangerous - it’s often not the situation itself (an interview, public speaking, a party, being chatted up, etc) that makes your body sick and shaky, it’s how you think about it. We can use CBT to recognise that our thinking causes us to see these metaphorical tigers – and we can learn healthy new thinking that banishes them and lets us relax and enjoy our life and opportunities and experiences.

But… for the purpose of this exercise – let us just look at the physiology of fight or flight here – as it is shown to help people better manage the situation if they understand, scientifically, exactly what is happening and why. Understanding that fight or flight is a natural bodily reaction with a beginning, a
middle and an end – and that it is actually a sophisticated elaborate chain developed to help and protect you – can be hugely helpful. This learning can make it so that it happens less often and with less ferocity.

If you have anxiety (or are a ‘worrier), the chances are that you are fearful of many things, with the flight or flight hormones constantly simmering within, which may cause general fatigue, confusion, and ill health – this would also contribute to self-limiting decisions and behaviours, and would of course reinforce a negative view of the world.

We can challenge and relearn our behaviour and responses to stress triggers by restructuring our thoughts in a more rational and healthy way – but we also need to be aware of why we are physically feeling the way we are – this can help us to stave off panic and remain reasonably calm.

**Task: draw a silhouette of a body and ‘arrow’ physical symptoms you’ve experienced**
(Flip-chart exercise)

**The Physiology of Fight or Flight**

*What we know is happening...*

- **Tunnel vision**
- **Dizzy or light-headed**
- **Dizziness**
- **Difficulty breathing**
- **Heart pounding**
- **Surroundings seem distant or visual ‘tunnel’**
- **Difficulty breathing**
- **Heart pounding**
- **Nausea / diarrhea**
- **Need to urinate**
- **Trembling / shakiness**

.... how and why it’s happening:

- **Thoughts racing and disjointed** – caused by an adrenaline release.
- **Dizzy / light-headed** – due to adrenaline and increased oxygen levels.
- **Surroundings seem distant or visual ‘tunnel’** – your pupils dilate to allow you to take in as much visual information as possible. Eyes refocus to the distance to spot danger.
- **Heart pounding** – The heart starts beating faster to increase circulation, since the body anticipates it will be working harder to service the muscles.
- **Difficulty breathing** – the lungs throat and nostrils open up to flood the lungs with enough oxygen to keep up with the increased circulation of blood (re-oxygenating it) – this can trigger shallow rapid breathing.

**... Task: match the previously arrowed symptoms to the above points and see ‘what’s happening?’**.

Memorise the things that happen and why... expect them, respect them, let them pass....
"YEAH YEAH... BUT, WHAT THE HELL WILL I DO!!"

It is common that some people feel even more anxious and scared when these physical effects of fight or flight kick in (they start out feeling anxious about the situation, then they get the physical symptoms and are freaked out by them as well – which accelerates and amplifies the symptoms up to an actual ‘panic attack’). For some, it becomes the fear of the physiology itself that causes a major and ongoing social fear issue (blushing, sweating, breathlessness). Attempting to ‘fight’ against the physical manifestations of anxiety almost always has the opposite effect and intensifies them. Try instead to simply ‘let them happen’ – try to ‘observe’ outside of yourself… tell yourself what’s happening to your body and why – example:

"This sweating is simply my body’s way of regulating its temperature as it’s overheated because I’m scared of this situation and I’ve gone into fight or flight – it will stop as soon as I calm down – I’ll breath in and out slowly and deeply... I am ok, I can cope, this is ok…"

Summary: what is happening with a person who reacts with anxiety and inappropriate physical symptoms is that their body is reacting to the situation as if were as dangerous as, say, a tiger or lion approaching to tear them apart. A false perception has occurred, triggering a very basic and automatic response. We can learn to challenge our perception of events, and because the fight or flight response occurs only when we perceive danger, it can be avoided or minimized if we can convince ourselves there is nothing to fear.

We can challenge and relearn our behaviour and responses to stress triggers by restructuring our thoughts in a more rational and healthy way with CBT – but we also need to be aware of how and why we are physically feeling the way we are – this can help us to stave off panic and remain reasonably calm.

Quick practical tips:

**Deep breathing**: because so many symptoms are caused by the oxygen/rapid breathing physiology – breathing control exercises are hugely helpful in easing them. *You can link audio of a breathing exercise on my blog and website.*

**Cardio exercise** – when you feel your body go into fight or flight jitters, do 5 minutes of physical exercise if possible in the environment you’re in (run up and down stairs, do sit ups...anything cardiovascular, something that makes you sweat!). The body has primed itself for something physically dramatic (the fighting the tiger or running away very quickly..) – and if you stay immobile it will be confused and take longer to return to homeostasis – the exercise will restore balance more quickly.

**Relaxation** – choose deliberately to do something you find relaxing (movie, book, candles and music, a walk in park, yoga, mindfulness, whatever) – the body has a ‘relaxation’ physical response, which releases chemicals that reduce stress hormones, this slows your heart rate and lowers blood pressure and relaxes muscles, returning you homeostasis (balance). *You can link to an audio Guided relaxation/breathing/visualization exercise on my blog/website www.CBTandFeelingGood.com.*
**BEWARE CORTISOL in fight or flight** (the stress hormone, or the ‘death hormone’ as it’s scarily called!) - **Cortisol** is a hormone that gets secreted when we are under physical and/or emotional stress. No matter what the source of stress, cortisol is released into the blood stream to help us cope, aiding our fight and flight response by putting sugar into the blood stream so our muscles and brain have the fuel needed to react.

Cortisol is generally high in the morning, but should subside by evening when our rest and repair system (parasympathetic system) is supposed to take over and return us to metabolic equilibrium (homeostasis). Or… at least that scenario is the appropriate stress response by the body – **BUT**, todays lifestyles and challenges mean that more and more of us are in a state of high cortisol most of the time – as our system keeps us in a constant state of ‘readiness’ for the perceived danger/threat of our ‘stressors’.

**This is very dangerous to our health** as cortisol curbs functions that are not essential for fight or flight, which alters the immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and the growth process. The long-term activation of the stress-response system — and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones — can disrupt almost all your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems, including:

- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Digestive problems
- Depression
- Obesity (particularly depositing fat around our middle section)
- Accelerated aging
- Memory impairment
- Skin problems
- etc.

**This is why it's so important to learn healthy ways to cope with the stressors in your life to help the body return to hormonal balance! Exercise, relaxation, CBT, visualisation, a good diet, and reviewing how you live your life will all help… start today!**

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**Last note: these physical symptoms are natural, and designed to help us. Awareness of this can reduce any negative amplification of fear and phobia, and teach additional ‘self-management’ using rational and calm consideration techniques. Think ‘wow, look what my body is doing – how amazing...’**.

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**Relaxation and Visualisation techniques**

It has been scientifically proven that visualisation and relaxation techniques can aid in relieving stress – **let’s sit back and listen to an audio recording of a relaxation script including visualisation methods**… (you can link to this from my website!)

**Audio task: 15 minute relaxation and visual exercise (requires, lights off, shoes too if you wish!)**

(This audio is on my website at CBTANDFEELINGGOOD.COM)