

HANDOUT 5-B

UNDERSTANDING THE PHYSICAL SENSATION OF ANXIETY

(Or, Mr. Caveman goes for a walk)

During a panic attack, it is quite natural to believe that your body or mind has betrayed you. You are having a heart attack. You feel like you're dying. You believe that you must be losing control or going crazy.

However, your body is not betraying you. In fact, it is trying to help you, to protect you from a danger that isn't there.

The human body is a wonderful apparatus, but it is out of date. We are still wired for life in the wild. We each have an "emergency response system" that involves lower centers of the brain and the hormonal system. The function of this system is to save your life if you are in literal physical danger. We are alive today largely because our ancestors had this system.

So, let's imagine that Mr. Caveman is out for a walk when he comes across a tiger. Even before the language area of his brain has registered the word "tiger," his emergency system is getting him ready to run. To run, you have to move large muscle groups (legs, arms, etc.). This movement requires fuel, so it is essential that large amounts of blood be immediately delivered to these areas. To make this happen, the emergency system says to the heart, "We need blood. Pump fast and hard." That is why you experience a rapid heartbeat during a panic attack. So rather than being a bad thing, your heart is trying to do a good thing. You don't like the way it feels, but it's a good thing nonetheless.

To move large muscle groups, you have to get a lot of oxygen to the large muscle groups. So the system says, "We need air; breathe fast and shallow." This is why people often feel like they can't breathe. Again, the sensation might be unpleasant but it is actually a good response.

This burning of fuel will create heat, so the system says to the sweat glands, "Sweat!" Blood flows from the brain in order to get to the large muscle groups. This is why you might feel dizzy, light-headed, or like you might faint. Again, it feels bad, but it is a good thing!

Digestion stops because there is no need to digest your meat if you're going to be meat any second! This is why people experience stomach distress or nausea.

The small blood vessels on the surface of the skin constrict, so the blood will go deeper into the muscle tissue. This is why you might feel tingling or numbness in your hands and feet.

So all these response would save your life if confronted by a tiger; the problem is that there is no tiger. A panic attack is essentially a false alarm.

Here are some important facts to remember: (1) These reactions are normal and harmless. Nothing bad is happening to you. (2) These responses are time-limited; they don't last very long. We can keep them going by how we think about them, but if we do nothing they will go away. (3) These responses are similar to what happens when you're excited, when you're angry, and when you exercise.

You will be given some tools to help you reduce the intensity of these responses, but our ultimate goal will be for you to trust your body and be OK even if your body is not particularly calm at any point in time.