

# Anxious About Grading



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## **Anxious About Grading**

I have chosen to write about anxiety as it is something I have struggled with throughout my life. Joining Taekwon-Do has been a great experience for me in many ways, although not without its challenges. Those challenges have helped me face my anxiety head on and to learn ways to manage it better.

I work as a Counsellor and see a lot of anxious clients. This has given me great insight into the lives of many who struggle with anxiety disorders on a daily basis. My personal life experience has enabled me to walk alongside my clients and truly understand the difficulties involved.

My Taekwon-Do journey began 8 years ago when my neighbour said she was going to enrol her son into a martial arts class to improve his self-confidence. She asked if my son would be interested in joining too. He was and we all went along. A couple of weeks had gone by and the boys were doing well and settling into their club. I had become quite comfortable sitting at the back of class, watching them and talking with the other parents. Never ever considering doing martial arts myself.

The next week we were sitting back watching the class rugged up in our tracksuits and scarves. My neighbour leaned over and said "we should get up and do the warm up exercise it will keep us warm its freezing". I gulped and said "No way am I getting up there" Then laughed. Most of the parents sitting next to us quietly giggled with me. Then she said "Oh come on" and pulled me up "take your shoes off let's have a go". Before I knew it we were up there, in the back of class hoping we looked semi coordinated and trying to see the funny side. We remained up for the rest of the class and that was how it all started.

The following months introduced many challenges to us all. It was great fun, until the word grading came up. Oh dear what! Grading .....Then the dreadful feelings of anxiety appeared. My self-critical dialogue went something like this. "Oh no, I won't be able to do this. I'll never be able to remember my pattern, Eek theory I can't learn Korean, I'll look really stupid," and so it went on. This would happen to me at every grading and tournament to follow.

I hope that by sharing my story with you, it will encourage you to continue to challenge your fears and to broaden your awareness around anxiety, As well as to give you tips to help manage your anxiety better.

**To better understand anxiety we need to look at what it is and what it is not.**

The core of anxiety is worrying about some potential threat that tends to be out of proportion or unrealistic to the situation e.g. losing control of yourself /or situation.

Anxiety can be distinguished from fear in several ways, when we are fearful it is usually directed toward some concrete external object e.g. a large animal racing towards you, or a situation usually within the bounds of possibility.

Anxiety on the other hand is something we often can't specify. It is more internal than external

Often anxiety can be brought on by thinking about a situation. When you feel distressed about what may happen you are experiencing anticipatory anxiety. In its milder form it is called worry when it becomes intense enough it becomes anticipatory panic.

If your anxiety arises only in response to a specific situation, e.g. a grading. It is called situational anxiety. It differs from everyday fear in that it tends to be out of proportion or unrealistic to the given situation.

The symptoms of anxiety can have a significant impact on how you behave, go about your daily life, and the choices that you make. It is important to realise that there are many situations that come up in everyday life, in which it is appropriate and reasonable to react with some anxiety. If we didn't feel any anxiety in response to stressors something would be wrong.

While you may be suffering with anxiety or an anxiety disorder all this means is you have overly anxious behaviour tendencies. Because it is a state of uneasiness that results when we worry. It doesn't mean you are somehow mentally deficient.

The word 'Anxiety' becomes a disorder when its sensations and symptoms interfere with your normal lifestyle. These include, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, generalised and social anxiety disorder.

**The equation used to sum it up is –**

**ANXIETY = OVERESTIMATION OF DANGER**

**UNDERESTIMATION OF ABILITY TO COPE.**

For the purpose of this paper I will write about anxiety in the context of situational anxiety. Specifically in relation to Taekwon-Do.

For example being asked to perform a pattern in front of the class. I remember being asked to do this shortly before my first grading. I started to feel really nervous, and began to worry about being able to remember it. I started to question myself. Will I look foolish? And let myself / instructor/ friends / club ..... Down.

This vicious cycle of negativity can instantly escalate and become overwhelming and very frightening.

Some of you may know the story about Chicken Little who thought the sky was falling?

Anxiety is a physiological, behavioural, and psychological reaction all at once.

Symptoms vary depending on the type of anxiety disorder. Generally symptoms include.

### **Physical reactions**

A Rapid heartbeat	Sweating	Feeling sick
Palpitations	Tingling	Feeling dizzy
Shortness of breath	Trembling	A Dry mouth
Pressure on the chest	Hot or cold flushes	Feeling weak at the knees

### **Psychologically**

Apprehension and unease	Losing control	Fear of dying
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### **Behaviourally**

Avoidance	Shutting down	Running away
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Fight

Most people who are anxious are very aware of the physical symptoms.

These are your body's response to danger or perceived threat. Our body responds in three ways. Fight, flight or freeze. The flight, fight, freeze reaction can be extreme, and the anxiety all consuming.

These three anxiety responses are good responses to danger. But unfortunately an anxiety sufferer can experience them when danger is not present or not as serious as they think.

The Vicious cycle can look like this

**ANXIETY**



**PHYSICAL**

Rapid heartbeat	Sweating Shaking
Feeling sick	Trembling
Irregular Breathing	Tightening up

**PSYCHOLOGICAL / MOOD**

Apprehension

Unease

Overwhelmed

Negative thinking focusing on the things we can't do

Everything else is forgotten

Everyone's looking at me



**BEHAVIOURAL**

Increased scanning for danger

Can't perform the pattern well

Give up

Convince myself this is not for me

Avoid stressful situations

----- Short term relief -----

Long term increase of symptoms leads to more worry and long term loss of confidence about coping, which is kept active by avoidance.

Avoidance keeps you stuck in your anxiety.

## **So what Causes Anxiety Disorders?**

If you are dealing with anxiety or anyone of the anxiety disorders you probably ask yourself. Why do I have this problem? Or why am I afraid of something I know isn't dangerous?

The exact cause is unknown but it is clear that many of these disorders are caused by a combination of factors. These may vary, not only according to the level in which they occur but also according to the time frame over which they operate. Some are predisposing causes that set you up from childhood, some could be recent or short term causes.

These can consist of hereditary, biological, family background and upbringing, recent stressors, personal beliefs, your self-esteem, the result of your negative self-talk, your ability to express yourself and so forth.

Personality traits can also perpetuate anxiety, some of these are really positive such as creativity, emotional sensitivity empathy to name a few, other common traits such as perfectionism, need for control , need for approval or ignoring physical and emotional signs of stress can feed anxiety.

## **Then when is anxiety unhelpful?**

The simple answer is when it stops you from growing and it interferes with your ability to lead a normal life.

As I mentioned earlier Anxiety impacts on your whole being. Then recovery needs to intervene at these three levels. Physically, psychologically and behaviourally.

- **Physically - To reduce physiological reactivity (*your body's reaction*)**
- **Psychologically - To change subjective interpretations ( *to change negative self-talk to positive*)**
- **Behaviourally - To eliminate avoidance behaviour (*sabotaging the ability to act, express or deal with everyday situations*)**

## So how can you manage your Anxiety better?

I remember my grading to black stripe when midway through I had a panic attack. I just wanted to get out of the Do Jang. It started off when we were asked to demonstrate our two step sparring. I couldn't remember it! I know this can happen to anyone, but in my case this sent me into a downward spiral on all 3 levels. I froze, and could not think straight. I felt all the physical symptoms of anxiety mentioned earlier. I was obviously holding my breath which made me feel like I was about to pass out. I turned to the examiners and was waiting to bow out, thankfully they didn't see me. (I'm pleased to say). It seemed like forever.

I managed to compose myself by changing my breathing. This helped me feel steadier on my feet and less stressed. I was then able to concentrate better and modify my unhelpful self-talk into a more positive way of thinking (Telling myself I can do it. I've done the work!) This helped me to refocus, remain on the floor, and finish my grading.

Focusing on my breathing, and modifying my thinking, (coping skills) were the key components that broke the negative cycle.

### **Reversing the negative cycle**

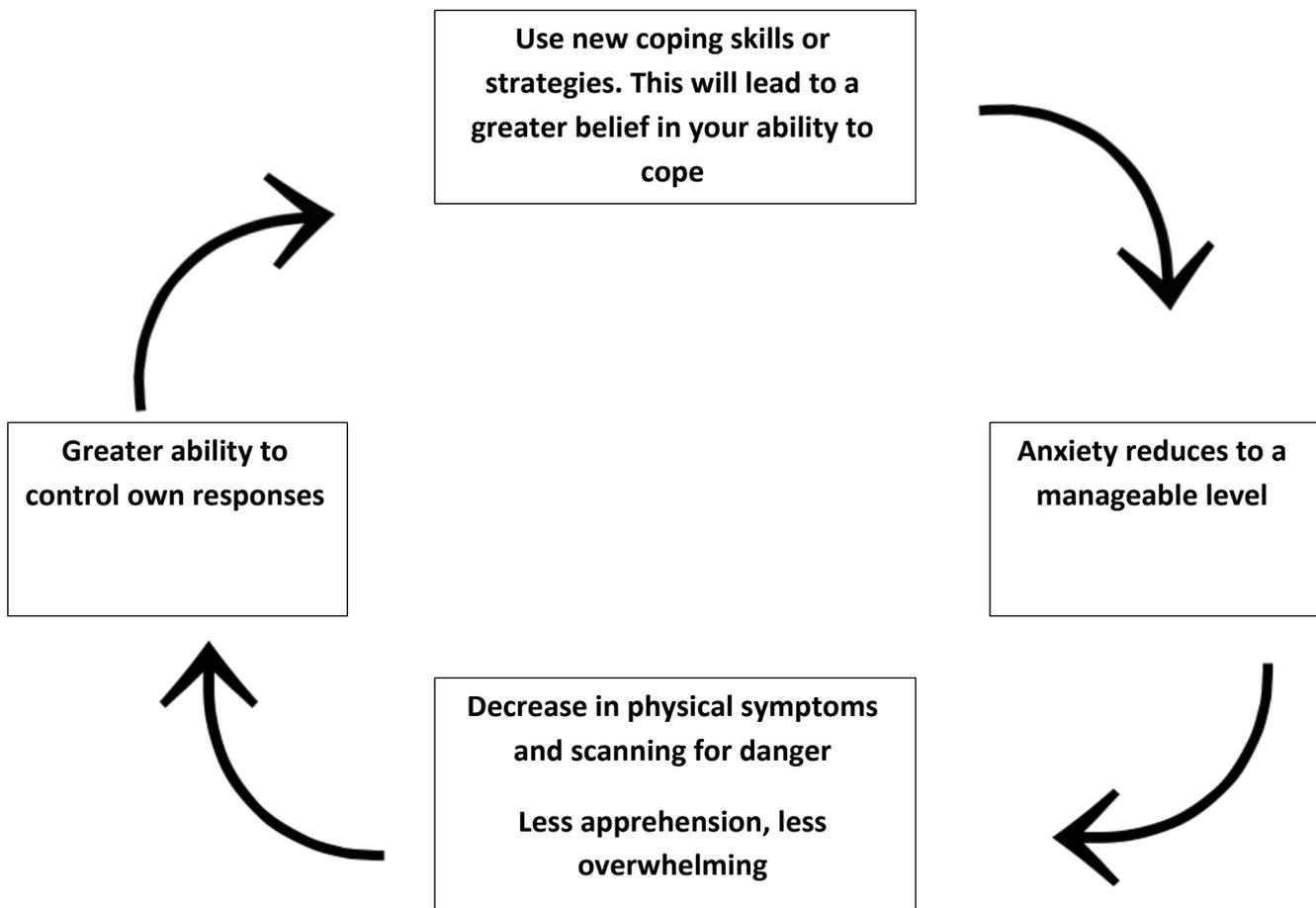
TKD Event

**Use new coping skills or strategies. This will lead to a greater belief in your ability to cope**

**Greater ability to control own responses**

**Anxiety reduces to a manageable level**

**Decrease in physical symptoms and scanning for danger**  
**Less apprehension, less overwhelming**



## Coping Strategies to counteract Anxiety at its early stage

The capacity to relax is at the very foundation of any program undertaken to overcome anxiety. The type of relaxation that makes a huge difference in dealing with anxiety is the regular daily practice of some form of deep relaxation.

### Some common methods include.

- **Abdominal breathing**
- **Progressive muscle relaxation**
- **Calming music**
- **Yoga/exercise / Taekwon-Do**
- **Visualising a peaceful scene**
- **Distraction techniques**
- **Positive affirmation**

Relaxation training can be divided into methods that focus on physical relaxation and on mental relaxation. When we are physically relaxed mental relaxation follows and vice versa. It is difficult for the body to be simultaneously relaxed and anxious at the same time.

### Abdominal breathing

Your breathing directly reflects the level of tension you carry in your body. Under tension your breathing usually becomes shallow and rapid and occurs high in the chest. Incorrect breathing patterns lead to an imbalance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body, which can cause the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Practicing abdominal breathing will help you to shift your breath down into your abdomen. Full abdominal breathing will also increase your lung capacity helping you to breathe more deeply.

### Abdominal breathing Exercise

1. Place one hand on your abdomen right below your rib cage
2. Inhale slowly through your nose into the bottom of your lungs (*your hand should rise, Your chest should only slightly rise*)
3. When you have taken a full breath, pause for a moment and then exhale slowly through your mouth, making sure you have fully exhaled.
4. Do ten slow abdominal breaths, keeping your breathing smooth and at a regular pace. By counting to four on the inhale and four on the exhale will help to slow down your breathing.

Slow inhale..1-2-3-4..slow exhale..1-2-3-4. Remember to pause naturally between each inhalation. Do a set of 10 this should take about one and a half minutes.

Extend the exercise to two or three sets if you wish. (*If you feel light headed while practising just stop for 20 seconds, and then start again*).

A full five minutes of abdominal breathing will have a pronounced effect on reducing anxiety symptoms. If possible try to do this on a daily basis, so that your breathing exercise becomes a habit. With Practice you will learn to quickly lessen the physiological reactions to anxiety and feel more relaxed on an ongoing basis.

### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation.**

Progressive muscle relaxation is especially helpful for people whose anxiety is strongly associated with muscle tension.

The aim of this exercise is to note the difference between a tense body and a relaxed body. Regular practise once a day will produce a significant reduction in your overall level of anxiety. I find this exercise helpful done when you go to bed each night. I have found it very helpful in reducing worry, and to help me to sleep better.

This exercise involves tensing and relaxing, in succession the different muscle groups of the body. Starting from your head and moving down to your toes. Each muscle group should be tensed for at least 7 to 10 seconds then relaxed for at least 15 to 20 seconds. When you have finished the exercise mentally, scan over your body and if tension is still present in a particular muscle just repeat the process for that muscle.

When you have finished imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body.

### **Exercise**

Exercise is a natural outlet for your body when it is in the fight flight mode of arousal. It needs to be of sufficient regularity, intensity and duration to have the best effect on anxiety. Ideally exercise should be aerobic. Taekwon-Do is ideal for this. Personally the harder I train the better I feel.

### **Imagery / Visualisation**

Imagery is one of the most basic ways in which our mind can store information. It has been called the 'language of the unconscious mind' Imagery or visualisation has been known to help people act in positive ways that lead to success. It is through practising visualisation that many athletes achieve peak performance in their field of sport. I have heard people at club sharing with others how they visualised a happy or calming place to help them negotiate a hard situation like trying to do a 4 minute prone hold. Visualising your success in advance can also be helpful e.g. breaking a board.

## **Positive Affirmations**

The truth is. That what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation, determines how we feel.

People who suffer from anxiety are generally prone to engage in negative self-talk. Such statements usually start off with the two words 'what if.' What if thinking may lead you to expect the worst possible outcome in any given situation. Even though it is highly unlikely to happen.

Anxious self-talk is typically irrational but tricks us into thinking it sounds like the truth.

Our self-talk sets us up for avoidance and the use of safety behaviours.

Learning to challenge negative self-talk with more balanced thoughts will positively reduce the experience of anxiety.

The most effective way to deal with negative self-talk is to counter it with positive, supportive statements. Some examples of counterstatements may look like these.

'I can't do this' ..... 'I have done a lot work in preparation for this. I can do this!'

'I'll make a mistake' ..... 'It's okay to make a mistake just keep going'

## **Conclusion**

The subject matter around anxiety is immense. I have tried to incorporate as much material as possible without overwhelming you with too much information. My hope is to help anyone who is dealing with anxiety regardless of the extent, to find ways to make your life more balanced and less anxious.

The coping strategies I have outlined have been particularly useful in the overall management of my anxiety. There are a number of strategies you can use. It depends on what fits for you. Each of us brings to the situation our own history and our own reactions, we each have our own unique characteristic pattern of reaction and response.

Taekwon-Do has enriched my life on many levels. It has provided a supportive environment in which I could safely challenge my fears and continue to grow in confidence. If you're reading this and are anxious remember your strengths and keep moving forward. But most of all don't give up.

I am proud to be writing this essay as I continue on my journey from my humble beginnings as an observer of Taekwon-Do, toward my grading for 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree Black Belt.

If you are concerned about your anxiety and wish to get further help, a visit to your GP would be a good start. There are a number of people who work specifically in the field of Anxiety that are available to help you.

**TAE-KWON**

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