

How Thoughts can Increase Anxiety

The thoughts we have play a major part in increasing or decreasing our anxiety.

Two examples may make it clearer how thoughts can add to anxiety and lead to it getting out of control.

Mrs Brown was alarmed to find herself feeling dizzy while waiting at a bus stop. Then she noticed her heart was pounding and her legs felt as if they were giving way. Because the symptoms came out of the blue, she was terrified that she was about to collapse, or even die, and she continued to feel frightened until safely home. After that, just thinking about going out made her feel nervous, and sometimes brought the dizzy feeling back.

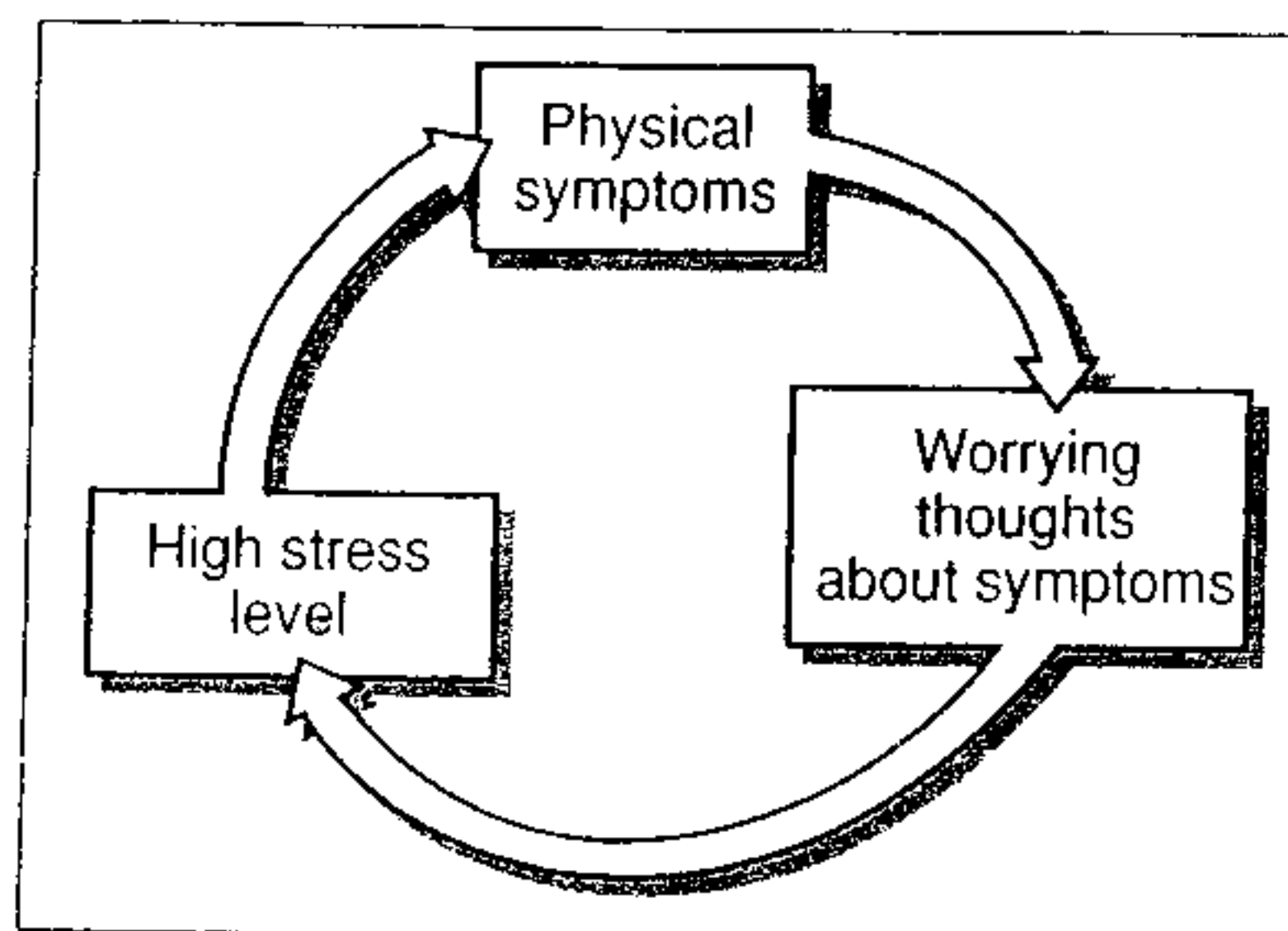
Mr Jones noticed that he felt very tense and irritable when there was a lot of work to be done, and it took him a long time to unwind afterwards. He went to his doctor after starting to get headaches every evening, and although the doctor could not find anything wrong, the patient started to worry that some disease might have been missed. This worry made it even more difficult for him to relax after work.

Although these problems seem quite different, both were caused by a combination of worry and physical tension. Because the feelings did not seem to make any sense, both people started to worry about them, although this only made things worse. They both began to become anxious about being anxious, or to worry more about symptoms than the background stress that originally caused those symptoms.

Research suggests that many people who suffer from anxiety make matters worse for themselves by misinterpreting these physical symptoms. Common misinterpretations include: "I'm going to have a heart attack", "I'm going to die", "I'm going to go completely out of

control", "I'm going to embarrass myself terribly", and "I am damaging my health". All these thoughts are very frightening and tend to keep the physical anxiety well stoked up. It must be remembered that these thoughts are also inaccurate distortions of what is actually happening.

The vicious circle of worrying thoughts and physical symptoms is illustrated below:



Sometimes we are not fully aware that these frightening thoughts are flashing through our mind. They occur very quickly and often just below the level of consciousness. It is important to try and identify these thoughts and recognize the role they play in creating and maintaining anxiety.