

# Understanding How Different Triggers Affect Your Anxiety

There are many things that can trigger your worry and anxiety and many of your worries may have several different triggers.

Many people with anxiety disorders say that their worries begin with an external situation or event, and anticipating this event triggers worrisome thoughts, memories, and physical sensations. These triggers can overlap and even seem like they are happening at the same time. When anxiety feels overwhelming it may even trigger a panic attack and then it is hard to recall how this episode started.

Take Nora, for example, who worried about her upcoming College Board exam. When Nora looked at a calendar and saw the exam was only three weeks away, she started thinking about what would happen if she got a bad score on the exam. She couldn't stop thinking about the embarrassment of doing really poorly and not being able to get into a good college. Nora thought about other times when her anxiety felt as if it would keep her from doing her best, like when she was supposed to play her violin in a recital and she felt so sick to her stomach that she threw up. As the exam grew closer, Nora woke up each day feeling a knot in her stomach and this made her think about the upcoming test and she started feeling that she couldn't catch her breath. Then Nora began thinking about what would happen if she threw up or fainted during the test and how embarrassing that would be. Nora started feeling there was no way she could take the exam and asked her mother if she could postpone it to another time.

Some people who have frequent panic attacks say sometimes their anxiety starts with a fear of the physical sensations of having an attack. For example, Peter had panic attacks that seemed to come out of nowhere. He would be getting ready for work and then he would suddenly feel a pain in his chest, and he would have difficulty breathing. He thought he was having a heart attack and became fearful that he would just drop dead. Several times he asked his wife to drive him to the emergency room, only to find out that nothing was physically wrong with him.

Think about the last time you felt anxious. The circles represent four different kinds of triggers. Write in where you think your anxiety started: with an external event, a thought, a memory, or a physical sensation. Then draw an arrow to the next circle (trigger), and write in what happened, and so on. You might see that only two types of triggers are part of your anxiety reaction, or you may see that all four types of triggers are involved. Make copies of this diagram to fill out every time you feel anxious. See if there are any patterns to your anxiety triggers.

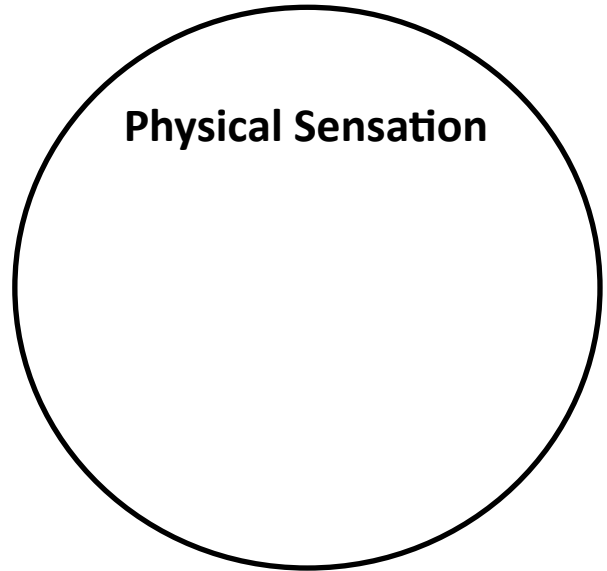
# Understanding Your Anxiety Triggers

When you feel anxious, write in the triggers that seem to start and fuel your anxiety. Then draw an arrow to the next circle and fill in what happened, and so on.

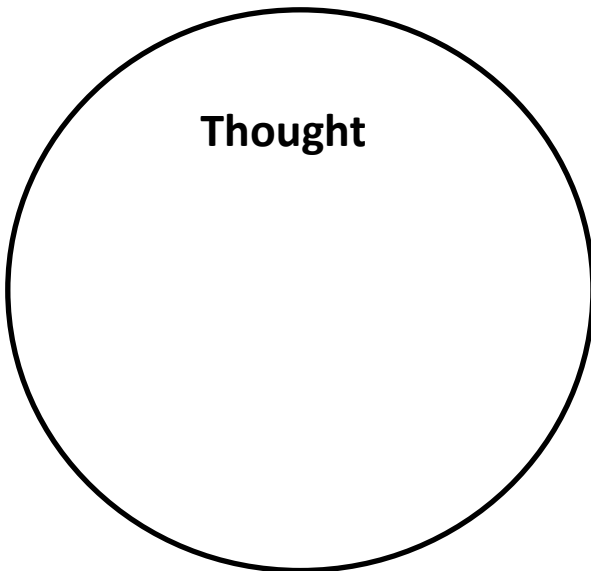
**Anticipated Event**



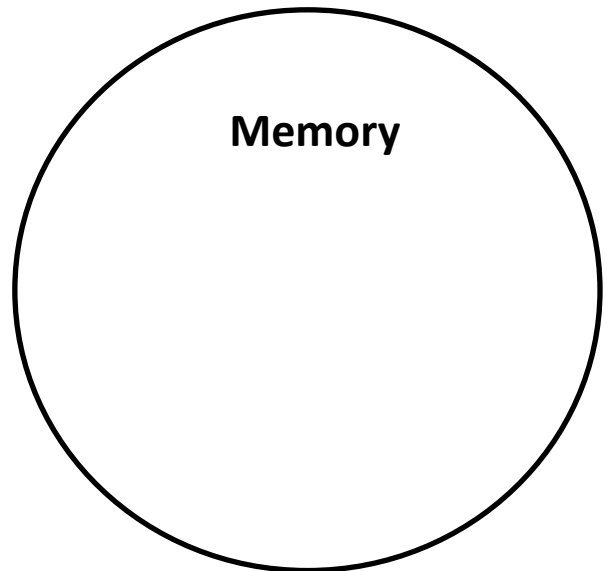
**Physical Sensation**



**Thought**



**Memory**



Did you try anything to stop one trigger from connecting to another?

---

---

---