

# HELPING PATIENTS DEAL WITH THEIR ANXIETY

## ASSESSMENT OF ANXIETY IN THE BODY

Based on Chapters 2 & 4 of  
*Mastering Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy*

### 1 SOMATOMOTOR (STRIATED MUSCLE) CHANNEL

Manifested as muscular tension. Tension appears in a predictable sequence.

- 1 Thumb (opponens pollicis)
- 2 Mouth (around the mouth)
- 3 Preorbital muscles (around the eyes)
- 4 Forearm
- 5 Upper arm
- 6 Shoulders
- 7 Neck
- 8 Face (cheeks, eyelids, forehead)
- 9 Vocal cords (lump in throat)
- 10 Abdominal wall
- 11 Intercostal muscles
- 12 Lower back
- 13 Legs

Other somatomotor signs:

- Muscle tension, aching
- Trembling / shaking
- Facial tics
- Sighing
- Deep breathing
- Yawning
- Swallowing
- Change in posture / rigid posture
- Restlessness / inability to sit still

### 4 COGNITIVE / PERCEPTUAL DISTURBANCES

At higher intensity, anxiety interferes with thinking and perception.

- Tunnel vision
- Blurred vision
- Dry eyes
- Tinnitus (ringing in ears)
- Hallucinations
- Derealization
- Depersonalization
- Dissociation
- Delayed thinking
- Accelerated thinking
- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Spacing out / blankness
- Poor memory
- Poor judgement

### 2 SYMPATHETIC AUTONOMIC CHANNEL

Signs of sympathetic activation.

- Dry mouth
- Dry eyes
- Sweating (palms)
- Sweating (axilla)
- Cold hands
- Blushing
- Goose pimples
- Tachycardia (increased heart rate)
- Increased cardiac force
- Increased blood pressure
- Peripheral vasoconstriction
- Pallor
- Shivering

### 3 PARASYMPATHETIC AUTONOMIC CHANNEL

Signs of parasympathetic activation.

- Nausea
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Urge to urinate / frequent urination
- Dizziness
- Fainting / feeling like fainting
- Drowsiness
- Jelly legs (weak in the knees)
- Headache (migraine)
- Abdominal cramps
- Borborygmi (bowel sounds)
- Vasovagal reactions

### INTERPRETING THE PATTERN

The proportion, intensity, and time course of these manifestations indicate the patient's capacity to regulate anxiety for his own benefit.



PROPORTION

Which channel predominates?



RISE

Slow or fast?



SPREAD

How wide?



DURATION

Short or long?



FALL

Relatively fast or slow?

BLOG



## The Body Never Lies: A Therapist's Guide to Recognizing and Regulating Anxiety

Before we can help our patients feel anything, we must first help them handle their anxiety. In ISTDP, anxiety isn't just "in the mind"—it lives in the body, and the body shows us exactly how much it can handle.



### Why the Body Tells the Truth

Chapters 2 and 4 of *Mastering Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy* explain that anxiety is a physiological response organized through specific neurobiological systems. The way anxiety discharges in the body reveals a patient's capacity to regulate it—and that determines how safely we can explore painful feelings.



### Three Channels, Three Stories

Anxiety is discharged through three main channels: somatomotor (muscles), sympathetic (fight–flight), and parasympathetic (shutdown-related). When tolerance is exceeded, anxiety also disrupts thinking and perception.

**Each channel shows us something different about the patient's current capacity.**



### Assess, Don't Guess

Our job is to observe: Which channel is predominant? How fast does anxiety rise? How wide does it spread? How long does it last? How quickly does it fall? This is not about labels—it's about regulation.

**Accurate assessment prevents overwhelm and builds the conditions for deep, transformative work.**



### Helpless → Handleable

When we titrate our interventions to the patient's real-time anxiety capacity, we help them experience what was once unbearable. Little by little, their window of tolerance expands.

**Anxiety is not the enemy—overwhelming anxiety is. Our role is to help patients move from helpless to handleable.**



### KEY TAKEAWAY

The body speaks in symptoms. When we learn its language, we can guide our patients safely through the storm—and toward the feelings that set them free.



Adapted from Chapters 2 & 4 of  
ten Have-de Labije, J., & Neborsky, R. J. (2012).  
*Mastering Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy:  
A Roadmap to the Unconscious*. London: Karnac Books.